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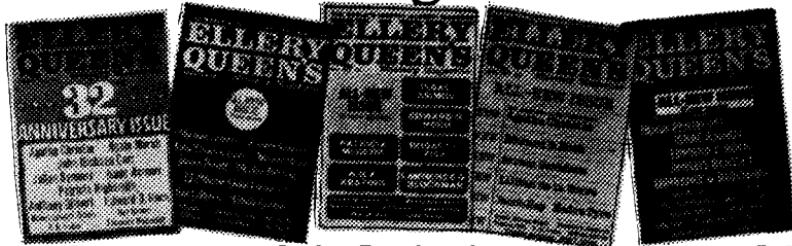
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# ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

FALL-  
WINTER  
**1973**

EDITED BY

"Ellery Queen"  
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ELLERY QUEEN



# Rex Stout

## The Rodeo Murder

*So far as we can recall, no one has ever said about New York City that anything can happen there and usually does. (On second thought surely someone must have said it!) But would you believe a rope-dropping contest from a penthouse on 63rd Street onto a cowboy and horse one hundred feet below? Out West, yes, from a mesa instead of a penthouse. But right off Park Avenue in Bagdad-on-the-Hudson?*

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### **Detectives: NERO WOLFE and ARCHEE GOODWIN**

Cal Barrow was standing at the tail end of the horse with his arm extended and his fingers wrapped around the strands of the rope that was looped over the horn of the cowboy saddle. His gray-blue eyes—as much of them as the half-closed lids left in view—were straight at me. His voice was low and easy, and noise from the group out front was coming through the open door, but I have good ears.

"Nothing to start a stampede," he said. "I just wanted to ask you how I go about

taking some hide off a toad in this town." To give it as it actually sounded I would have to make it, "Ah jist wanted to ask yuh how Ah go about takin' some hide off a toad," but that's too complicated, and from here on I'll leave the sound effects to you if you want to bother.

I was sliding my fingertips up and down on the polished stirrup strap so that observers, if any, would assume that we were discussing the saddle. "I suppose," I said, "it's a two-legged toad." Then, as a

brown-haired cowgirl named Nan Karlin, in a pink silk shirt opened at the throat and regulation Levis, came through the arch and headed for the door to the terrace, lifting the heels of her fancy boots to navigate the Kashan rug that had set Lily Rowan back fourteen thousand bucks, I raised my voice a little so she wouldn't have to strain her ears if she was curious. "Sure," I said, rubbing the leather, "you could work it limber, but why don't they make it limber?"

But I may be confusing you, since a Kashan carpet with a garden pattern in seven colors is no place for a horse to stand, so I had better explain. The horse was a sawhorse. The saddle was to go to the winner in a roping contest that was to start in an hour. The Kashan, 19x34, was on the floor of the living room of Lily Rowan's penthouse, which was on the roof of a ten-story building on 63rd Street between Madison and Park Avenues, Manhattan. The time was three o'clock Monday afternoon. The group out on the terrace had just gone there for coffee after leaving the dining room, where the high point of the meal had been two dozen young blue grouse which had come from Montana on man-made wings, their own having stopped working. As we

had moseyed through the living room on our way to the terrace Cal Barrow had got me aside to say he wanted to ask me something private, and we had detoured to inspect the saddle.

When Nan Karlin had passed and was outside, Cal Barrow didn't have to lower his voice again because he hadn't raised it. "Yeah, two legs," he said. (Make it "laigs.") "I got to ask somebody that knows this town and I was thinking this bozo Goodwin is the one to ask; he's in the detective business here and he ought to know. And my friend Harvey Greve tells me you're okay. I'm calling you Archie, am I?"

"So it was agreed at the table. First names all around."

"Suits me." He let go of the rope and gripped the edge of the cantle. "So I'll ask you. I'm a little worked up. Out where I live I wouldn't have to ask nobody, but here I'm no better'n a dogie. I been to Calgary and Pendleton, but I never come East before this blowout. Huh. World Series Rodeo. From what I see so far you can have it."

He made it "roe-day-oh" with the accent on the "day." I nodded. "Madison Square Garden has no sky. But about this toad. We're supposed to go out with them for coffee. How much of his hide do you need?"

"I'll take a fair-sized patch." There was a glint in his eye. "Enough so he'll have to lick it till it gets a scab. The trouble is this blamed blowout, I don't want to stink it up my first time here; if it wasn't for that I'd just handle it. I'd get him to provoke me."

"Hasn't he already provoked you?"

"Yeah, but I'm leaving that out. I was thinking you might even like to show him and me something. Have you got a car?"

I said I had.

"Then when we get through here you might like to take him and me to show us some nice little spot like on the river bank. There must be a spot somewhere. It would be better if you was there anyhow because if I kinda lost control and got too rough you could stop me. When I'm worked up I might get my teeth on the bit."

"Or I could stop him if necessary."

The glint showed again. "I guess you don't mean that. I wouldn't like to think you mean that."

I grinned at him, Archie to Cal. "What the hell, how do I know? You haven't named him. What if it's Mel Fox? He's bigger than you are, and Saturday night at the Garden I saw him bulldog a steer in

twenty-three seconds. It took you thirty-one."

"My steer was meaner. Mel said so himself. Anyway, it's not him. It's Wade Eisler."

My brows went up. Wade Eisler couldn't bulldog a milk cow in twenty-three hours, but he had rounded up ten million bucks, more or less, and he was the chief backer of the World Series Rodeo. If it got out that one of the cowboy contestants had taken a piece of his hide it would indeed stink it up, and it was no wonder that Cal Barrow wanted a nice little spot on a river bank. I not only raised my brows; I puckered my lips.

"Ouch," I said. "You'd better let it lay, at least for a week, until the rodeo's over and the prizes awarded."

"No, sir. I sure would like to, but I got to get it done. Today. I don't rightly know how I held off when I got here and saw him here. It would be a real big favor, Mr. Goodwin. Will you do it?"

I was beginning to like him. Especially I liked his not shoving by overworking the "Archie." He was a little younger than me, but not much, so it wasn't respect for age; he just wasn't a fudger.

"How did he provoke you?" I asked.

"That's private. Didn't I say I'm leaving that out?"

"Yes, but I can leave it out, too. I don't say I'll play if you tell me, but I certainly won't if you don't. Whether I play or not, you can count on me to leave it out—or keep it in. As a private detective I get lots of practice keeping things in."

The gray-blue eyes were glued on me. "You won't tell anyone?"

"Right."

"Whether you help me or not?"

"Right."

"He got a lady to go to his place last night by telling her he was having a party, and when they got there there wasn't any party, and he tried to handle her. Did you see the scratch on his cheek?"

"Yes, I noticed it."

"She's not very big, but she's active. All she got was a little skin off her ear when her head hit a corner of a table."

"I noticed that, too."

"So I figure he's due to lose a bigger—" He stopped short. He slapped the saddle. "Now, damn it, that's me every time. Now you know who she is. I was going to leave that out."

"I'll keep it in. She told you about it?"

"Yes, sir, she did. This morning."

"Did she tell anyone else?"

"No, sir, she wouldn't. I got no brand on her, nobody has,

but maybe someday when she quiets down a little and I've got my own corral . . . You've seen her on a bronc."

I nodded. "I sure have. I was looking forward to seeing her off of one, closer up, but now of course I'll keep my distance. I don't want to lose any hide."

His hand left the saddle. "I guess you just say things. I got no claim. I'm a friend of hers and she knows it, that's all. A couple of years ago I was wrangling dudes down in Arizona and she was snapping sheets at the hotel, and we kinda made out together and I guess I come in handy now and then. I don't mind coming in handy as long as I can look ahead. Right now I'm a friend of hers and that suits me fine. She might be surprised to know how I—"

His eyes left me and I turned. Nero Wolfe was there, entering from the terrace. Somehow he always looks bigger away from home, I suppose because my eyes are so used to fitting his dimensions into the interiors of the old brownstone on West 35th. There he was, a mountain coming at us. As he approached he spoke. "If I may interrupt?" He allowed two seconds for objections, got none, and went on. "My apologies, Mr. Barron." To me: "I have thanked

Miss Rowan for a memorable meal and explained to her. To watch the performance I would have to stretch across that parapet and I am not built for it. If you drive me home now you can be back before four o'clock."

I glanced at my wrist. Ten after three. "More people are coming, and Lily has told them you'll be here. They'll be disappointed."

"Pfui. I have nothing to contribute to this frolic."

I wasn't surprised; in fact, I had been expecting it. He had got what he came for, so why stick around? What had brought him was the grouse. When, two years back, I had returned from a month's visit to Lily Rowan on a ranch she had bought in Montana (where, incidentally, I had met Harvey Greve, Cal Barrow's friend), the only detail of my trip that had really interested Wolfe was one of the meals I described. At that time of year, late August, the young blue grouse are around ten weeks old and their main item of diet has been mountain huckleberries, and I had told Wolfe they were tastier than any bird Fritz had ever cooked, even quail or woodcock. Of course, since they're protected by law, they can cost up to five dollars a bite if you get caught.

Lily Rowan doesn't treat

laws as her father did while he was piling up the seventeen million bucks he left her, but she can take them or leave them. So when she learned that Harvey Greve was coming to New York for the rodeo, and she decided to throw a party for some of the cast, and she thought it would be nice to feed them young blue grouse, the law was merely a hurdle to hop over. Since I'm a friend of hers and she knows it, that will do for that. I will add only a brief report of a scene in the office on the ground floor of the old brownstone. It was Wednesday noon. Wolfe, at his desk, was reading *The Times*. I, at my desk, finished a phone call, hung up, and swiveled.

"That's interesting," I said. "That was Lily Rowan. As I told you, I'm going to a roping contest at her place Monday afternoon. A cowboy is going to ride a horse along Sixty-third Street, and other cowboys are going to try to rope him from the terrace of her penthouse, a hundred feet up. Never done before. First prize will be a saddle with silver trimmings."

He grunted. "Interesting?"

"Not that. That's just games. But a few of them are coming earlier for lunch, at one o'clock, and I'm invited, and she just had a phone call from Montana. Twenty young blue grouse,

maybe more, will arrive by plane Saturday afternoon, and Felix is going to come and cook them. I'm glad I'm going. It's too bad you and Lily don't get along—ever since she squirted perfume on you."

He put the paper down to glare. "She didn't squirt perfume on me."

I flipped a hand. "It was her perfume."

He picked up the paper, pretended to read a paragraph, and dropped it again. He passed his tongue over his lips. "I have no animus for Miss Rowan. But I will not solicit an invitation."

"Of course not. You wouldn't stoop. I don't—"

"But you may ask if I would accept one."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"Good. She asked me to invite you, but I was afraid you'd decline and I'd hate to hurt her feelings. I'll tell her." I reached for the phone.

I report that incident so you'll understand why he got up and left after coffee. I not only wasn't surprised when he came and interrupted Cal Barrow and me, I was pleased, because Lily had bet me a sawbuck he wouldn't stay for coffee. Leaving him there with Cal, I went to the terrace.

In the early fall Lily's front terrace is usually sporting

annual flowers along the parapet and by the wall of the penthouse, and a few evergreens in tubs scattered around, but for that day the parapet was bare, and instead of the evergreens, which would have interfered with rope whirling, there were clumps of sagebrush two feet high in pots. The sagebrush had come by rail, not by air, but even so the part of Lily that had ordered it and paid for it is not my part. That will be no news to her when she reads this.

I glanced around. Lily was in a group seated to the right, with Wade Eisler on one side and Mel Fox on the other. In dash she wasn't up to the two cowgirls there, Nan Karlin in her pink silk shirt and Anna Casado, dark-skinned with black hair and black eyes, in her yellow one, but she was the hostess and not in competition. In situations that called for dash she had plenty. The other four were standing by the parapet at the left—Roger Dunning, the rodeo promoter, not in costume; his wife Ellen, former cowgirl, also not in costume; Harvey Greve in his brown shirt and red neck-rag and corduroy pants and boots; and Laura Jay. Having Laura Jay in profile, I could see the bandage on her ear through the strands of her hair, which was exactly the

color of the thyme honey that Wolfe gets from Greece. At the dinner table she had told me that a horse had jerked his head around and the bit had bruised her, but now I knew different.

Stepping across to tell Lily I was leaving but would be back in time for the show, I took a side glance at Wade Eisler's plump, round face. The scratch, which began an inch below his left eye and slanted down nearly to the corner of his mouth, hadn't gone very deep and it had some fifteen hours to calm down by Cal Barrow's account, but it didn't improve his looks any, and there was ample room for improvement. He was one of those New York characters that get talked about and he had quite a reputation as a smooth operator, but he certainly hadn't been smooth last night—according to Laura Jay as relayed by Cal Barrow. The caveman approach to courtship may have its points if that's the best you can do, but if I ever tried it I would have more sense than to pick a girl who could rope and tie a frisky calf in less than a minute.

After telling Lily I would be back in time for the show and was looking forward to collecting the sawbuck, I returned to the living room. Wolfe and Cal were admiring the saddle. I told Cal I would think it over

and let him know, went to the foyer and got Wolfe's hat and stick, followed him down the flight of stairs to the tenth floor, and rang for the elevator. We walked the two blocks to the parking lot where I had left the Heron sedan, which Wolfe had paid for but I had selected. Of course a taxi would have been simpler, but he hates things on wheels. To ride in a strange vehicle with a stranger driving would be foolhardy; with me at the wheel in a car of my choice it is merely imprudent.

Stopped by a red light on Park Avenue in the Fifties, I turned my head to say, "I'm taking the car back because I may need it. I may do a little errand for one of the cowboys. If so I probably won't be home for dinner."

"A professional errand?"

"No. Personal."

He grunted. "You have the afternoon, as agreed. If the errand is personal it is not my concern. But, knowing you as I do, I trust it is innocuous."

"So do I." The light changed and I fed gas.

It was ten minutes to four when I got back to the parking lot on 63rd Street. Walking west, I crossed Park Avenue and stopped for a look. Five cops were visible. One was talking to

the driver of a car who wanted to turn the corner, two were standing at the curb talking, and two were holding off an assortment of pedestrians who wanted to get closer to three mounted cowboys. The cowboys were being spoken to by a man on foot, not in costume. As I moved to proceed one of the cops at the curb blocked me and spoke. "Do you live in this block, sir?"

I told him no, I was going to Miss Lily Rowan's party, and he let me pass. The New York Police Department likes to grant reasonable requests from citizens, especially when the request comes from a woman whose father was a Tammany district leader for thirty years. There were no parked cars on that side of the street, but twenty paces short of the building entrance a truck with cameras was hugging the curb, and there was another one farther on, near Madison Avenue.

When I had left with Wolfe, Lily had had nine guests; now she had twenty or more. Three of the new arrivals were cowboys, making six with Cal Barrow, Harvey Greve, and Mel Fox; the rest were civilians. They were all on the terrace. The civilians were at the parapet, half at one end and half at the other, leaving the

parapet clear for thirty feet in the middle. The cowboys, their ten-gallon hats on their heads and their ropes in their hands, were lined up facing a tall skinny man in a brown suit. At the man's elbow was Roger Dunning, the promoter. The man was speaking.

"... and that's the way it's going to be. I'm the judge and what I say goes. I repeat that Greve hasn't done any practicing, and neither has Barrow or Fox. I have Miss Rowan's word for that, and I don't think you want to call her a liar. I've told you the order, but you don't move in until I call your name. Remember what I said, if you take a tumble off a bronc it's four feet down; here it's a hundred feet down and you won't get up and walk. Once again, *no hooligan stuff*. There's not supposed to be any pedestrians on this side of the street from four o'clock to five, but if one comes out of a house and one of you drops a loop on him you won't sleep in a hotel room tonight. We're here to have some fun, but don't get funny." He looked at his watch. "Time to go. Fox, get—"

"I want to say something," Roger Dunning said.

"Sorry, Roger, no time. We promised to start on the dot. Fox, get set. The rest of you scatter."

He went to the parapet, to the left, and picked up a green flag on a stick that was there on a chair. Mel Fox stepped to the middle of the clear stretch, straddled the parapet, and started his noose going. The others went right and left to find spots in the lines of guests. I found a spot on the right that happened to be between Laura Jay and Anna Casado. Leaning over to get a view of the street, I saw I was blocking Laura Jay and drew in a little.

The three mounted cowboys and the man I had seen talking to them were grouped on the pavement halfway to Park Avenue. The judge stuck his arm out with the green flag and dipped it, the man down with the mounted cowboys said something, and one of the ponies was off on the jump, heading down the middle of the lane between the curb on our side and the parked cars on the other. Mel Fox, leaning out from his hips, moved his whirling loop back a little, and then brought it forward and let it go. When it reached bottom it was a little too far out and the cowboy on the pony was twenty feet ahead of it. The instant it touched the pavement Fox started hauling it in; he had thirty seconds until the flag started number two. He had it up and a noose going in less

than that, but the judge went by his watch.

The flag dipped, and here came the second one. That was a little better; the rope touched the pony's rump, but it was too far in. Fox hauled in again, shifted his straddle a little, and started another whirl. That time he nearly made it. Anna Casado, on my left, let out a squeal as the rope, descending smoothly in a perfect circle, brushed the edge of the cowboy's hat. The audience clapped, and a man in a window across the street shouted "Bravo!" Fox retrieved his rope, taking his time, dismounted from the parapet, said something I didn't catch because of other voices, and moved off as the judge called out, "Vince!"

A chunky little youngster in a purple shirt, Levis, and working boots mounted the parapet. Saturday night I had seen him stick it out bareback on one of the roughest broncs I had ever seen—not speaking as an expert. He wasn't so hot on a parapet. On his first try his loop turned straight up, which could have been an air current, on his second it draped over a parked car across the street, and on his third it hit the asphalt ten feet ahead of the pony.

Harvey Greve was next. Naturally I was rooting for him,

since he had done me a lot of favors during the month I had spent at Lily's ranch. Lily called something to him from the other end of the parapet, and he gave her a nod as he threw his leg over and started his loop. His first throw was terrible; the noose buckled and flipped before it was halfway down. His second was absolutely perfect; it centered around the cowboy like a smoke ring around a fingertip, and Harvey timed the jerk just right and had him. A yell came from the audience as the cowboy tightened the reins and the pony braked, skidding on the asphalt. He loosened the loop with one hand and passed it over his head, and as soon as it was free the judge sang out "Thirty seconds!" and Harvey started hauling in. His third throw sailed down round and flat, but it was too late by ten feet.

As the judge called Barrow's name and Cal stepped to the parapet, Laura Jay, on my right, muttered, "He shouldn't try it." She was probably muttering to herself, but my ear was right there and I turned my head and asked her why. "Somebody stole his rope," she said.

"Stole it? When? How?"

"He don't know. It was in the closet with his hat and it was gone. We looked all around.

He's using the one that was on that saddle and it's new and stiff, and he shouldn't—"

She stopped and I jerked my head around. The flag had dipped and the target was coming. Considering that he was using a strange rope, and a new one, Cal didn't do so bad. His loops kept their shape clear down, but the first one was short, the second was wide, and the third hit bottom before the pony got there.

Neither of the last two ropers, one named Lopez and the other Holcomb, did as well. When Holcomb's third noose curled on the curb below us the judge called, "Second round starts in two minutes! Everybody stay put!"

There were to be three rounds, giving each contestant a total of nine tries. Roger Dunning was stationed near the judge, with a pad of paper and a pen in his hand, to keep score in case the decision had to be made on form and how close they came; but since Harvey Greve had got one that wouldn't be necessary.

In the second round Fox got a rider and Lopez got a pony. In the third round Holcomb got a rider and Harvey got his second one. The winner and first world champion rope-dropper or drop-roper from one hundred feet up: Harvey Greve!

He took the congratulations and the riding from the other competitors with the grin I knew so well, and when he got kissed by a friend of Lily's who was starring in a hit on Broadway and knew how to kiss both on stage and off, his face was nearly as pink as Nan Karlin's shirt. Anna Casado broke off a branch of sagebrush and stuck it under his hatband. Lily herded us into the living room, where we gathered around the sawhorse, and Roger Dunning was starting a presentation speech when Cal Barrow stopped him.

"Wait a minute, this goes with it," Cal said, and went and hung the rope on the horn. He turned and sent the blue-gray eyes right and then left. "I don't want to start no fuss right now, but when I find out who took mine I'll want to know." He moved to the rear of the crowd, and Dunning put his hand on the seat of the saddle. Dunning had a long and narrow bony face with a scar at the side of his jaw.

"This is a happy occasion," he said. "Thank God nothing happened, like one of you falling off. I wanted to have a net down—"

"Louder!" Mel Fox called.

"You're just sore because you didn't win," Dunning told him. "I wanted to have a net

below but they wouldn't. This magnificent saddle with genuine silver rivets and studs was handmade by Morrison, and I don't have to tell you what that means. It was donated by Miss Lily Rowan, and I want to thank her for her generosity and hospitality on behalf of everybody concerned. I now declare Harvey Greve the undisputed winner of the first and only roping contest ever held in a Park Avenue penthouse—anyway, just outside the penthouse and we could see Park Avenue—and I award him the prize, this magnificent saddle donated by Miss Lily Rowan. Here it is, Harvey."

Applause and cheers. Someone called "Speech!" and others took it up, as Harvey went and flattened his palm on the sudadero. He faced the audience. "I tell you," he said, "if I tried to make a speech you'd take this saddle away from me. The only time I make a speech is when a cayuse gets from under me and that's no kind for here. You all know that was just luck out there, but I'm mighty glad I won because I sure had my eye on this saddle. The lady that kissed me, I didn't mind that at all, but I been working for Miss Lily Rowan for more'n three years and she never kissed me yet and this is her last chance."

They let out a whoop, and Lily ran to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and planted one on each cheek, and he went pink again. Two men in white jackets came through the arch, with trays loaded with glasses of champagne. In the alcove a man at the piano and two with fiddles started *Home on the Range*. Lily had asked me a week ago what I thought of having the rug up and trying some barn dancing, and I had told her I doubted if many of the cowboys and girls would know how, and none of the others would. Better just let the East meet the West.

The best way to drink champagne, for me anyhow, is to gulp the first glass as a ~~prize~~ and sip from there on. Lily was busy being a hostess, so I waited to go and touch glasses with her until I had taken a couple of sips from my second. "Doggone it," I told her, "I'd a brung my rope and give it a whirl if I'd known you was goin' tuh kiss the winner." She said, "Huh. If I ever kissed you in front of an audience the women would scream and the men would faint."

I moved around a while, being sociable, and wound up on a chair by a clump of sagebrush on the terrace, between Laura Jay and a civilian. Since I knew him well

and didn't like him much, I didn't apologize for hornin' in. I asked her if Cal had found his rope, and she said she didn't think so, she hadn't seen him for the last half hour.

"Neither have I," I said. "He doesn't seem to be around. I wanted to ask him if he'd found it. I haven't seen Wade Eisler either. Have you?"

Her eyes met mine straight. "No. Why?"

"No special reason. I suppose you know I'm in the detective business."

"I know. You're with Nero Wolfe."

"I work for him. I'm not here on business, I'm a friend of Miss Rowan's, but I'm in the habit of noticing things, and I didn't see Wade Eisler at the parapet while they were roping, and I haven't seen him since. I know you better than I do the others, except Harvey Greve, because I sat next to you at lunch, so I just thought I'd ask."

"Don't ask me. Ask Miss Rowan."

"Oh, it's not that important. But I'm curious about Cal's rope. I don't see why—"

Cal Barrow was there. He had come from the rear and was suddenly there in front of me. He spoke, in his low easy voice. "Can I see you a minute, Archie?"

"Where have you been?" Laura demanded.

"I been around."

I stood up. "Find your rope?"

"I want to show you. You stay hitched, Laura." She had started up. "You hear me?" It was a command, and from her stare I guessed it was the first one he had ever given her. "Come along, Archie," he said, and moved.

He led me around the corner of the penthouse. On that side the terrace is only six feet wide, but in the rear there is space enough for a badminton court and then some. The tubs of evergreens that had been removed from the front were there, and Cal went on past them to the door of a shack which Lily used for storage. The grouse had been hung there Saturday afternoon. He opened the door and entered, and when I was in shut the door. The only light came from two small windows at the far end, so it was half dark coming in from broad daylight, and Cal said, "Look out, don't step on him."

I turned and reached for the light switch and flipped it, turned back, and stood and looked down at Wade Eisler. As I moved and squatted Cal said, "No use taking his pulse. He's dead."

He was. Thoroughly. The

protruding tongue was purple and so were the lips and most of the face. The staring eyes were wide-open. The rope had been wound around his throat so many times, a dozen or more, that his chin was pushed up. The rest of the rope was piled on his chest.

"That's my rope," Cal said. "I was looking for it and I found it. I was going to take it but I thought I better not."

"You thought right." I was on my feet. I faced him and got his eyes. "Did you do it?"

"No, sir."

I looked at my wrist: twelve minutes to six. "I'd like to believe you," I said, "and until further notice I do. The last I saw you in there you were taking a glass of champagne. More than half an hour ago. I haven't seen you since. That's a long time."

"I been hunting my rope. When I drank that one glass I asked Miss Rowan if she minded if I looked and she said no. We had already looked inside and out front. Then when I come in here and found him I sat on that box a while to think it over. I decided the best thing was to get you."

"Wasn't this door locked?"

"No, sir. It was shut but it wasn't locked."

That was possible. It was often left unlocked in the

daytime. I looked around. The room held all kinds of stuff—stacks of luggage, chairs, card tables, old magazines on shelves—but at the front, where we were, there was a clear space. Everything seemed to be in place; there was no sign that Eisler had put up a fight, and you wouldn't suppose a man would stand with his hands in his pockets while someone got a noose around his neck and pulled it tight. If he had been conked first, what with?

I stepped to a rack against the wall on the left and put a hand out, but pulled it back. One of those three-foot stainless-steel rods, for staking plants, would have been just the thing, and the one on top was lying across the others. If I had gloves and a glass with me, and there had been no rush, and Cal hadn't been there with his eyes boring at me, I would have given it a look.

I opened the door, using my handkerchief for the knob, and stepped out. There were six windows in the rear of the penthouse, but except for the two near the far corner, which belonged to the maid's room and bathroom, their view of the shack and the approach to it was blocked by the evergreens. That had been a break for the murderer; there had certainly been someone in the kitchen.

I went back inside, shut the door, and told Cal, "Here's how it is. I have to get the cops here before anyone leaves if I want to keep my license. I don't owe Wade Eisler anything, but this will be a sweet mess for Miss Rowan and I'm a friend of hers, so I'm curious. When did you first miss the rope?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again. He shook his head. "I guess I made a mistake," he said. "I should have took that rope off and found it somewhere else."

"You should like hell. It would have been a cinch for the police lab to prove it had been around his neck. When did you first miss it?"

"But I had told you about last night and how I was worked up and you had promised to keep it in, and I figured I couldn't expect you to be square with me if I wasn't square with you, so I went and got you. Now the way you take it, I don't know."

"For God's sake." I wasn't as disgusted as I sounded. "What did you think, I'd bring you a bottle of champagne? Wait till you see how the cops take it. When did you first miss the rope?"

"I don't know just what time. It was a while after you left, maybe twenty minutes. With people coming and putting

things in that closet I thought I'd get it and hang onto it."

"Had you put it in the closet yourself?"

"Yeah. On the shelf with my hat on top. The hat was there but the rope was gone."

"Did you tell someone right away?"

"I looked all over the closet and then I told Laura and she told Miss Rowan. Miss Rowan asked everybody and she helped Laura and me look some, but people started coming."

"At the time you missed the rope had anybody already come? Was anyone here besides those who ate lunch with us?"

"No, sir."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure enough to put a no on it. They ain't much a man can be dead sure of. It might be someone came I didn't see, but I was right there and I'd have to—"

"Save it." I glanced at my watch: five minutes to six. "At the time you missed the rope where was Wade Eisler?"

"I don't know."

"When did you see him last?"

"I can't say exactly. I wasn't riding herd on him."

"Did you see him after you missed the rope? Take a second. This is important. Take ten."

He screwed up his lips and shut his eyes. He took the full

ten seconds. His eyes opened. "No, sir, I didn't."

"Sure enough to put a no on it?"

"I already did."

"Okay. Do you know if anyone else was worked up about Wade Eisler?"

"I wouldn't say worked up. I guess nobody wanted him for a pet."

"As it looks now, someone who ate lunch with us killed him. Have you any idea who?"

"No, sir. I don't expect to have none."

"That's noble. Don't be *too* noble. There's plenty more, but it will have to wait. If I leave you here while I go in and tell Miss Rowan and call the cops will you stay put and keep your hands off of that rope?"

"No, sir. I'm going to see Laura. I'm going to tell her if they ask her anything she better leave it out about last night."

"You are not." I was emphatic. "You've got no brand on her, you said so. You may think you know how she'll take a going-over by experts, but you don't. Every move anybody makes from now on will get on the record, and if you go and call her away from that baboon she's sitting with, what does she say and what do you say when they ask you why? She'll either leave it out or she won't, and you'll only

make it worse if you tell her to. If you won't promise you'll stick here I'll just open the door and yell for Miss Rowan, and she can call the cops."

His jaw was working. "You said you believed me."

"I do. If I change my mind I'll let you know first. What you told me and what you asked me to do, I said I'd keep it in and I will, provided you do, too. We were discussing the saddle. Well?"

"I figure to keep everything in. But if I could just tell her—"

"No. She probably won't spill it, but if she does and says she told you about it that won't break any bones. You left it out because you didn't want to cause her trouble. Everybody leaves things out when cops ask questions. Do I yell for Miss Rowan?"

"No. I'll stay hitched."

"Come outside and stand at the door. You've already touched the knob twice and that's enough. If anyone comes keep them off." Using my handkerchief again, I opened the door. He stepped out and I pulled the door shut as I crossed the sill. "Be seeing you," I said, and went.

I entered at the rear and glanced in at the kitchen on the chance that Lily was there. No. Nor the living room. The piano and fiddles were playing *These*

*Fences Don't Belong.* I found her on the terrace, caught her eye and gave her a sign, and she came. I headed for the dining room, and when she had followed me in I closed the door.

"One question," I said. "That's all there's time for. When did you last see Wade Eisler?"

She cocked her head and crinkled her eyes, remembering. I have mentioned a part of her that wasn't mine; this was a part of her that was mine. No what or why; I had asked her a question and she was digging up the answer. She took longer than Cal had.

"It was soon after you left," she said. "He put his cup down and I asked him if he wanted more coffee and he said no. Someone did want some and the pot was nearly empty and I went to the kitchen for more. Felix and Robert were arguing about when the champagne should be put on ice, and I sent Freda to the terrace with the coffee and stayed there to calm them down. Who's worrying about Wade Eisler?"

"Nobody. How long did you stay in the kitchen?"

"Oh, ten minutes. Felix can be difficult."

"Eisler wasn't there when you went back?"

"I didn't notice. They had

scattered. Some of them were in the living room. Then Laura Jay told me Cal Barrow's rope was gone and I helped them look, and then people came."

"When did you notice that Eisler wasn't around?"

"Some time later. Roger Dunning wanted someone to meet him and asked me where he was. I didn't know and didn't care. I supposed he had left without bothering to thank me for the meal. He would." She tossed her head. "That's four questions. What's the point?"

"Cal Barrow was looking for his rope and found Eisler's body on the floor of the shack with the rope around his neck. He came and got me. He's there guarding the door. Will you phone the police or do you want me to?" I glanced at my wrist: four minutes after six. "It's already been sixteen minutes since I saw him and that's enough."

"No," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Wade Eisler hanged himself?"

"No. He's not hanging, he's on the floor. Also, after the noose was pulled tight the rope was wound around his neck a dozen times. He didn't do that."

"But how could—who would—no!"

"Yes. It would be me to hand you something like this, but at that I'm glad it is. I mean, since it happened I'm glad I'm here. Do you want me to phone?"

She swallowed. "No, I will. It's my house." She touched my sleeve. "I'm *damn* glad you're here."

"Spring seven, three one hundred. I'll repeat that number: Spring seven—"

"You clown! All right, I needed it, that helped. I'll phone from the bedroom."

She moved, but I stopped her. "Do you want me to collect the guests and tell them the cops are coming?"

"Oh, my God. Here in my house—but of course that's routine. That's etiquette—when you're having a party and someone finds a body you collect the guests and make an announcement and say you hope they'll come again and—"

"You're babbling."

"So I am." She went, and I had to step to get to the door ahead of her.

Since a prowler car was certainly in the neighborhood there wasn't much time, and I went to the terrace and sang out, "Everybody inside! Don't walk, run! Inside, everybody!" I entered the living room and mounted a chair. I wanted to see their faces. You seldom get

anything helpful from faces, especially when there are more than twenty of them, but you always think you might. Those already inside approached, and those coming from the terrace joined them. I turned to the musicians and patted the air, and they broke off. Mel Fox said in a champagne-loud voice, "She's gone and got a saddle for me." Laughter. When you've been drinking champagne for an hour laughing comes easy.

I raised a hand and waggled it. "I've got bad news," I said. "I'm sorry, but here it is. A dead body has been found on the premises. The body of Wade Eisler. I have seen it. He was murdered. Miss Rowan is notifying the police and they will soon be here. She asked me to tell you. Of course nobody will leave."

What broke the silence was not a gasp but a giggle, from Nan Karlin. Then Roger Dunning demanded, "Where is he?" and Laura Jay moved, darting to the door to the terrace and on out, and the faces I had wanted to see turned away as Lily appeared through the arch.

She came on. She raised her voice. "All right, I got you here and we're in for it. I don't go much by rules, but now I need one. What does the perfect hostess do when a guest murders another guest? I

suppose I ought to apologize, but that doesn't seem . . ."

I had stepped down from the chair. It wasn't up to me to welcome the cops, it was Lily's house and she was there, and anyway it would only be a pair from a prowler car. The homicide specialists would come later. Circling the crowd, I made for a door at the other side of the room, passed through, and was in what Lily called the kennel because a guest's dog had once misused the rug there. There were book shelves, and a desk and safe and typewriter, and a phone. I went to the phone and dialed a number I could have dialed with my eyes shut. Since Wolfe's afternoon session up in the plant rooms with the orchids was from four to six, he would have gone down to the office and would answer it himself.

He did. "Yes?"

"Me. Calling from the library in Miss Rowan's apartment. Regarding Wade Eisler. The one with a pudgy face and a scratch on his cheek. I gathered from your expression when he called you Nero that you thought him objectionable."

"I did. I do."

"So did somebody else. His body has been found in a storage room here on the roof. Strangled with a rope. The police are on the way. I'm

calling to say that I have no idea when I'll be home, and I thought you ought to know that you'll probably be hearing from Cramer. A man getting croaked a few hours after he ate lunch with you—try telling Cramer you know nothing about it."

"I shall. What do you know about it?"

"The same as you. Nothing."

"It's a confounded nuisance, but it was worth it. The grouse was superb. Give Miss Rowan my respects." I said I would.

The kennel had a door to the side hall, and I left that way, went to the side terrace, and headed for the shack. As I expected, Cal was not alone. He stood with his back against the door, his arms folded. Laura Jay was against him, gripping his wrists, her head tilted back, talking fast in a voice so low I caught no words. I called sharply, "Break it up!" She whirled on a heel and a toe, her eyes daring me to come any closer. I went closer. "You damn fool," I said, reaching her. "Snap out of it. Beat it! Get!"

"She thinks I killed him," Cal said. "I been trying to tell her, but she won't—"

What stopped him was her hands pressed against his mouth. He got her wrists and pulled them away. "He knows

about it," he said. "I told him." "Cal! You didn't! You mustn't—"

I got her elbow and jerked her around. "If you want to make it good," I said, "put your arms around his neck and moan. When I poke you in the ribs that'll mean a cop's coming and you'll moan louder and then turn and let out a scream, and when he's close enough, say ten feet, you leap at him and start clawing his face. That'll distract him and Cal can run to the terrace and jump off. Have you got anything at all in your skull besides air? What do you say when they ask you why you dashed out to find Cal when I announced the news? That you wanted to be the first to congratulate him?"

Her teeth were clamped on her lip. She unclamped them. She twisted her neck to look at Cal, twisted back to look at me, and moved. One slow step, and then she was off, and just in time. As she passed the first evergreen the sound came of the back door of the penthouse closing, and heavy feet, and I turned to greet the company. It was a harness bull.

Even when I get my full ration of sleep, eight hours, I don't break through my personal morning fog until I have emptied my coffee cup, and

when the eight is cut to five by events beyond my control, as it was that night, I have to grope my way to the bathroom. After getting home at five in the morning, and leaving a note for Fritz saying I would be down for breakfast at 10:45, I had set the alarm for ten o'clock. That had seemed sensible, but the trouble with an alarm clock is that what seems sensible when you set it seems absurd when it goes off.

Before prying my eyes open I stayed flat a while, trying to find an alternative, and had to give up when I was conscious enough to realize that Wolfe would come down from the plant rooms at eleven. Forty minutes later I descended the two flights to the ground floor, entered the kitchen, told Fritz good morning, got my orange juice from the refrigerator, and sat at the table where my copy of *The Times* was on the rack. Fritz, who is as well acquainted with my morning fog as I am, and never tries to talk through it, uncovered the sausage and lit the fire under the griddle for cakes.

The murder of Wade Eisler with a lasso at the penthouse of Lily Rowan rated the front page even in *The Times*. There was no news in it for me, nothing that I didn't already know, after the five hours I had

spent at the scene of the crime with Homicide personnel; three hours at the District Attorney's office, and three hours back at the penthouse with Lily, at her request. Cal Barrow was in custody as a material witness. The District Attorney couldn't say if he would be released in time for the Tuesday evening rodeo performance. Archie Goodwin had told *The Times* reporter that he had not been at the penthouse in his professional capacity; he and Nero Wolfe had merely been guests. The police didn't know what the motive had been, or weren't telling. Wade Eisler, a bachelor, had been a well-known figure in sporting and theatrical circles. *The Times* didn't say that he had had a chronic and broad-minded taste for young women but the tabloids certainly would. And so forth.

I was spreading honey on the third griddle cake when the sounds came of the elevator jolting to a stop and then Wolfe's footsteps in the hall crossing to the office. He wouldn't expect to find me there, since Fritz would have told him of my note when he took his breakfast tray up, so I took my time with the cake and honey and poured more coffee. As I was taking a sip the doorbell rang and I got up and went to the hall for a look.

Through the one-way glass in the front door I saw a big broad frame and a big pink face that was all too familiar. The hall on the ground floor of the old brownstone is long and wide, with the walnut clothes rack, the elevator, the stairs, and the door to the dining room on one side, the doors to the front room and the office on the other, and the kitchen in the rear. I stepped to the office door, which was standing open, and said, "Good morning, Cramer."

Wolfe, in his oversized chair behind his desk, turned his head to scowl at me. "Good morning. I told him on the phone last evening that I have no information for him."

I had had two cups of coffee and the fog was gone. "Then I'll tell him to try next door."

"No." His lips tightened. "Confound him. That will only convince him that I'm hiding something. Let him in."

I went to the front, opened the door, and inquired, "Good lord, don't you ever sleep?"

I will never get to see Inspector Cramer at the top of his form, the form that has kept him in charge of Homicide for twenty years, because when I see him I am there and that throws him off. It's only partly me; it's chiefly that I make him think of Wolfe, and thinking of

Wolfe is too much for him. When he has us together his face gets pinker and his voice gets gruffer, as it did that morning.

He sat in the red leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk, leaning forward, his elbows planted on the chair arms. He spoke. "I came to ask one question. Why were you there yesterday? You told me on the phone last night that you went there to eat grouse, and Goodwin said the same. It's in his signed statement. Nuts. You could have had him bring the grouse here and had Fritz cook it."

Wolfe grunted. "When you are invited to someone's table to taste a rare bird you accept or decline. You don't ask that the bird be sent to you—unless you're a king."

"Which you think you are. You're named after one."

"I am not. Nero Claudius Caesar was an emperor, not a king, and I wasn't named after him. I was named after a mountain."

"Which you are. I still want to know why you were there with that bunch. You never leave your house on business, so it wasn't for a client. You went with Goodwin because he asked you to. Why did he ask you to? Why did you sit next to Wade Eisler at lunch? Why did

Goodwin have a private talk with one of them, Cal Barrow, just before he drove you home? Why did Barrow go to him when he found the body? Why did Goodwin wait twenty minutes before he had Miss Rowan report it?"

Wolfe was leaning back, his eyes half closed, being patient. "You had Mr. Goodwin at your disposal all night. Weren't those points covered?"

Cramer snorted. "They were covered, all right. He knows how to cover. I'm not saying he knew or you knew Eisler's number was up. I don't say you know who did it or why. I do say there was some kind of trouble and Miss Rowan was involved in it, or at least she knew about it, and that's why Goodwin got you to go. You told me last night that you know nothing about any of those people except Miss Rowan, and your knowledge of her is superficial. I don't believe it."

"Mr. Cramer." Wolfe's eyes opened. "I lie only for advantage, never merely for convenience."

I cut in. "Excuse me." I was at my desk, at right angles to Wolfe's. Cramer turned to me. "I'd like to help if I can," I told him, "on account of Miss Rowan I was backstage at the rodeo twice last week, and it's

barely possible I heard or saw something that would open a crack. It would depend on how it stands. I know you're holding Cal Barrow. Has he been charged?"

"No. Material witness. It was his rope and he found the body."

"I am not concerned," Wolfe growled, "but I remark that that would rather justify holding the others."

"We haven't got your brains," Cramer growled back. To me: "What did you hear and see backstage at the rodeo?"

"I might remember something if I knew more about it. I know Eisler wasn't there when I returned at four o'clock, but I don't know who saw him last or when. Is everybody out except the ones who were there for lunch?"

"Yes. He was there when Miss Rowan left to go to the kitchen for coffee. That was at three twenty, eight minutes after you left, as close as we can get it. No one remembers seeing him after that, so they say. No one noticed him leave the terrace, so they say. He got up from the lunch table at five minutes to three. He emptied his coffee cup at three twenty. The stomach contents say that he died within twenty minutes of that. None of the other guests came until a quarter to

four. So there's three cowboys: Harvey Greve, Cal Barrow, and Mel Fox. There's three cowgirls: Anna Casado, Nan Karlin, and Laura Jay. There's Roger Dunning and his wife. You and Wolfe weren't there. Miss Rowan was, but if you saw or heard anything that points at her you wouldn't remember it. Was she at the rodeo with you?"

"I don't remember. Skip it. You've got it down to twenty minutes, from three twenty to three forty. Wasn't anyone else missed during that period?"

"Not by anybody who says so. That's the hell of it. Nobody liked Eisler. Not a single one of them would give a bent nickel to see the murderer caught. Some of them might give a good nickel to see him get away with it. This might make you remember something you say or heard: Sunday night he took a woman to his apartment and it could have been one of the cowgirls. We haven't got a good description of her, but the fingerprint men are there now. Were you at the Garden on Sunday night?"

I shook my head. "Wednesday and Saturday. What about prints in the shack?"

"None that are any good."

"Last night I mentioned that a steel rod in a rack was crosswise."

"Yeah. We might have noticed it ourselves in time. It had been wiped. He had been hit in the back of the head with it. You can read about it in the evening paper. Do you want to come down and look at it?"

"You don't have to take that tone." I was hurt. "I said I'd like to help and I meant it. You need help, you're up a stump, or you wouldn't be here. As for what I heard and saw at the rodeo, I didn't know there was going to be a murder. I'll have to sort it out. I'll see if I can dig up anything and let you know. I thought you might—"

"Why, damn you!" He was on his feet. "String me along? I know damn well you know something! I'll see that you choke on it!" He took a step. "For the record, Goodwin. Have you knowledge of any facts that would help to identify the murderer of Wade Eisler?"

"No."

To Wolfe: "Have you?"

"No, sir."

"Have you any involvement of any kind with any of those people?"

"No, sir."

"Wait a minute," I put in. "To avoid a possible future misunderstanding." I got my case from my pocket, took out a slip of paper, and displayed it to Wolfe. "This is a check for

five thousand dollars, payable to you, signed by Lily Rowan."

"What's it for?" he demanded. "She owes me nothing."

"She wants to. It's a retainer. She asked me to go back to her place after they finished with me at the D.A.'s office last night, and I did so. She didn't like Wade Eisler, but two things were biting her. First, he was killed at her house by someone she had invited there. She calls that an abuse of hospitality and she thought you would. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"No argument there. Second, the daughter of District Attorney Bowen is a friend of hers. They were at school together. She has known Bowen for years. He has been a guest both at her apartment and her place in the country. And at midnight last night an Assistant D.A. phoned her and told her to be at his office in the Criminal Courts Building at ten o'clock this morning, and she phoned Bowen, and he said he couldn't allow his personal friendships to interfere with the functions of his staff. She then phoned the Assistant D.A. and told him she would call him today and tell him what time it would be convenient for her to see him at her apartment."

"There's too many like her," Cramer muttered.

"But she has a point," I objected. "She had told you all she knew and answered your questions and signed a statement, and why ten o'clock?" To Wolfe: "Anyway, here's her check. She wants you to get the murderer before the police do, and let her phone the D.A. and tell him to come for him—or she and I will deliver him to the D.A.'s office, either way. Of course I told her you wouldn't take the job on those terms, but you might possibly consider investigating the abuse of hospitality by one of her guests. I also told her you charge high fees, but she already knew that. I bring this up now because you just told Cramer you're not involved and if you take this retainer you *will* be involved. I told Miss Rowan you probably wouldn't take it because you're in the ninety-percent bracket for the year and you hate to work."

He was glowering at me. He knew that I knew he wouldn't turn it down with Cramer there. "It will be a costly gratification of a pique," he said.

"I told her so. She can afford it."

"Her reason for hiring me is the most capricious in my experience. But I have not only eaten her bread and salt, I have eaten her grouse. I am in her debt. Mr. Cramer, I change my

answer to your last question. I do have an involvement. My other answer holds. I have no information for you."

Cramer's jaw was clamped. "You know the law," he said, and wheeled and headed for the door.

When a visitor leaves the office it is my custom to precede him to the hall and the front door to let him out; but when it's Cramer and he's striding out in a huff I would have to hop on it to get ahead of him, which would be undignified; so I just follow to see that he doesn't take our hats from the shelf and tramp on them. When I emerged from the office Cramer was halfway down the hall, and after one glance I did hop on it. Out on the stoop, reaching a finger to the bell button, was Laura Jay.

I can outhop Cramer any day, but he was too far ahead and was opening the door when I reached it. Not wanting to give him an excuse to take me downtown, I didn't bump him. I braked. He said, "Good morning, Miss Jay. Come in."

I got Laura's eye and said, "Inspector Cramer is just leaving."

"I'm in no hurry," Cramer said, and backed up a step to give her room. "Come in, Miss Jay."

I saw it coming into her

eyes—that is, I saw something was coming. They were at Cramer, not at me, but I saw the sudden sharp gleam of an idea, and then she acted on it. She came in all right, on the jump, through the air straight at Cramer, hands first reaching for his face. By instinct he should have jerked back, but experience is better than instinct. He ducked below her hands and came up against her with his arms around her, clamping her to him, leaving her nothing to paw but air. I got her wrists from the rear, pulled them to me, and crossed her arms behind her back.

"Okay," I said, "you can unwrap."

Cramer slipped his arms from under hers and backed away. "All right, Miss Jay," he said. "What's the idea?"

She tried to twist her head around. "Let me go," she demanded. "You're breaking my arm."

"Will you behave yourself?"

"Yes."

As I let go she started to tremble, but then she stiffened, pulling her shoulders back. "I guess I lost my head," she told Cramer. "I didn't expect to see you here. I do that sometimes, I just lose my head."

"It's a bad habit, Miss Jay. What time is your appointment with Nero Wolfe?"

"I haven't got an appointment."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"I don't want to see him. I came to see Archie Goodwin."

"What about?"

Before she could answer a voice came from behind Cramer. "Now what?" Wolfe was there, at the door to the office.

Cramer ignored him. "To see Goodwin about what?" he demanded.

"I think I know," I said. "It's a personal matter. Strictly personal."

"That's it," Laura said. "It's personal."

Cramer looked at me and back at her. Of course the question was, if he took us downtown and turned us over to a couple of experts could they pry it out of us? He voted no. He spoke to me. "You heard me tell Wolfe he knows the law. So do you," and marched to the door, opened it, and was gone.

"Well?" Wolfe demanded.

I tried the door to make sure it was shut, and turned. "Miss Jay came to see me. I'll take her in the front room."

"No. The office." He turned and headed for the kitchen.

I allowed myself an inside grin. Thanks to my having produced the check with Lily's

offer of a job in Cramer's presence, he was actually working. When Laura and I had entered the office he would emerge from the kitchen and station himself at the hole. On the office side the hole was covered by a picture of a waterfall, on the wall at eye level to the right of Wolfe's desk. On the other side, in a little alcove at the end of the hall, it was covered by a sliding panel, and with the panel pushed aside you could not only hear but also see through the waterfall. I had once stood there for three hours with a notebook, recording a conversation Wolfe was having with an embezzler.

Laura retrieved her handbag, a big gray leather one, from the floor where it had dropped when she went for Cramer, and I escorted her to the office, took her jacket and put it on the couch, moved a chair for her to face my desk, swiveled my chair around, and sat. I looked at her. She was a wreck. I wouldn't have known her, especially since I had previously seen her all rigged out, and now she was in a plain gray dress with a black belt. Her cheeks sagged, her hair straggled, and her eyes were red and puffed. You wouldn't suppose a dashing cowgirl could get into such a state.

"First," I said, "why? Why did you go for him?"

She swallowed. "I just lost my head." She swallowed again. "I ought to thank you for helping me, when he asked what I came to see you for. I didn't know what to say."

"You're welcome. What do you say if I ask you?"

"I came to find out something. To find out if you told them what Cal told you yesterday. I know you must have because they've arrested him."

I shook my head. "They're holding him as a material witness because it was his rope and he found the body. I promised Cal I wouldn't repeat what he told me, and I haven't. If I did they'd have a motive for him, they couldn't ask for better, and they'd charge him with murder."

"You haven't told them? You swear you haven't?"

"I only swear on the witness stand and I'm not there yet. I have told no one, but I am now faced with a problem. Miss Rowan has hired Nero Wolfe to investigate the murder, and he will ask me for a full report of what happened there yesterday. I can't tell him what Cal told me because of my promise to Cal, and I'll have to tell him I am leaving something out, which he won't like. If Cal were

available I would get his permission to tell Mr. Wolfe, but he isn't."

"Then you haven't even told Nero Wolfe?"

"No."

"Will you promise me you won't tell the police? That you'll never tell them no matter what happens?"

"Certainly not." I eyed her. "Use your head if you've found it again. Their charging Cal with murder doesn't depend only on me. They have found out that Eisler took a woman to his apartment Sunday night and they're going over it for fingerprints. If they find some of yours, and if they learn that you and Cal are good friends, as they will, he's in for it, and I would be a damn fool to wait till they get me on the stand under oath."

I turned a palm up. "You see, one trouble is, you think Cal killed him and I know he didn't. You should be ashamed of yourself. You have known him two years and I only met him last week, but I know him better than you do. I can be fooled and have been, but when he got me aside yesterday and asked me how to go about taking some hide off a toad he was not getting set to commit a murder, and the murder of Wade Eisler was premeditated by whoever took Cal's rope.

Not to mention how he looked and talked when he showed me the body. If I thought there was a chance that Cal killed him I wouldn't leave anything out when I report to Mr. Wolfe. But I can't promise to hang onto it no matter what happens."

"You can if you will," she said. "I don't think Cal killed him. I know he didn't. I did."

My eyes widened. "You did what? Killed Eisler?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "Don't you see how it is? Of course I've got to tell them I killed him, but when they arrest me Cal will say he killed him because I told him about Sunday night. But I'll say I didn't tell him about Sunday night, and it will be my word against his, and they'll think he's just trying to protect me. So it *does* depend on you. You've got to promise you won't tell them what Cal told you yesterday. Because I killed him, and why should you protect me? Why should you care what happens to me if I killed a man?"

I regarded her. "You know," I said, "at least you've answered my question, why you went for Cramer. You wanted to plant the idea that you're a holy terror. That wasn't so dumb, in fact it was half bright, but now listen to you. You might possibly sell it to the cops that

you killed him, at least you could ball them up a while, but not me. When I went to the shack yesterday and found you there with Cal, the first thing he said was that you thought he had killed him. And now you—"

"Cal was wrong. How could I think he had killed him when I knew I had?"

"Nuts. I not only heard what he said, I saw his face, and I saw yours. You still think Cal killed him and you're acting like a half-wit."

Her head went down, her hands went up to cover her face, and she squeezed her breasts with her elbows. Her shoulders shook.

I sharpened my voice. "The very worst thing you could do would be to try telling the cops that you killed him. It would take them about ten minutes to trip you up, and then where would Cal be? But maybe you should tell them about Sunday night, but of course not that you told Cal about it. If they find your fingerprints in Eisler's apartment you'll have to account for them, and it will be better to give them the account before they ask for it. That won't be difficult; just tell them what happened."

"They won't find my fingerprints," she said, or I thought she did. Her voice was muffled

by her hands, still over her face.  
"Did you say they won't find your fingerprints?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm sure they won't."

I gawked at her. It wasn't so much the words as the tone—or not the tone, muffled as it was, but something. Call it a crazy hunch, and you never know exactly what starts a hunch.

"You can't be sure," I said. "You must have touched something. I've been to a party in that apartment. When you entered did you stop in the hall with the marble statues?"

"No. He... we went on through."

"To the living room. You stopped there?"

"Yes."

"Did he take you across to look at the birds in the cages? He always does. The cages are stainless steel, perfect for prints. Did you touch any of them?"

"No, I'm sure I didn't." She had dropped her hands and lifted her head.

"How close did you go to them?"

"Why... not very close. I'm sure I didn't touch them."

"So am I. I am also sure that you're a liar. There are no marble statues or bird cages in Eisler's apartment. You have never been there. What kind of a double-breasted fool are you,

anyway? Do you go around telling lies just for the hell of it?"

Naturally I expected an effect, but not the one I got. She straightened up in her chair and gave me a straight look, direct and steady.

"I'm not a liar," she said. "I'm not a fool either, except about Cal Barrow. The kind of a life I've had a girl gets an attitude about men, or anyway I did. No monkey business. Keep your fences up and your cinch tight. Then I met Cal and I took another look, and after a while I guess you would say I was in love with him, but whatever you call it I know how I felt. I thought I knew how he felt, too, but he never mentioned it, and of course I didn't. I only saw him now and then, he was mostly up north, and when I came to New York for this rodeo here he was. I thought he was glad to see me, and I let him know I was glad to see him, but still he didn't mention it, and when two weeks went by and pretty soon we would scatter I was trying to decide to mention it myself. Then Sunday night Nan told me about Wade Eisler, how he—" "Nan Karlin?"

"Yes. He had told her he was having a party at his apartment and she went with him, and when they got there there

wasn't any party, and he got rough; and she got rough, too, and she got away."

"She told you this Sunday night?"

"Yes, when she got back to the hotel she came to my room. It's next to hers. Then there was this ear." She lifted a hand to push her hair back over her left ear. "I'm telling you the whole thing. I got careless with a bronc Sunday night and got bruised by a buckle, and I didn't want to admit to Cal that I didn't know how to keep clear around a horse. So when we met for breakfast yesterday morning I told him—you know what I told him. I guess I thought when he heard that, how a man had tried to bulldog me, he would see that it was time to mention something. I know I was a damn fool, I said I'm a fool when it comes to Cal Barrow, but I guess I don't know him as well as I thought I did. He never goes looking for trouble. I thought he would just ride herd on me, and that would be all right, I wanted him to. I never dreamed he would kill him."

"He didn't. How many times do I have to tell you he didn't? Who else did Nan tell about it?"

"She was going to tell Roger Dunning. She asked me if I thought she should tell Roger, and I said yes, because he had

asked us to go easy with Eisler, not to sweat him unless we had to, so I thought he ought to know. Nan said she would tell him right away."

"Who else did she tell?"

"I guess not anybody. She made me promise not to tell Mel."

"Mel Fox?"

"Yes. She and Mel are going to tie up, and she was afraid he might do something."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course not. I promised Nan I wouldn't."

"Well." I lifted my hands and dropped them. "You're about the rarest specimen I've ever come across. I know something about geniuses, I work for one, but you're something new, an anti-genius. It wouldn't do any good to try to tell you—"

The phone rang, and I swiveled my chair around to get it. It was Lon Cohen of the *Gazette*. He wanted to know how much I would take for an exclusive on who roped Wade Eisler and why, and I told him I did and when I typed my confession I would make an extra carbon for him but at the moment I was busy.

As I reached to cradle the receiver Wolfe's voice sounded behind me, not loud but clear enough though it was coming through the waterfall that

covered the hole. "Archie, I got up and took it, an old don't move. Don't turn around. She has taken a gun from her bag and is pointing it at you. Miss Jay. Your purpose is clear. With Mr. Goodwin dead there will be no one to disclose what you told Mr. Barrow at breakfast yesterday but Mr. Barrow himself, and you will deny it. You will of course be doomed since you can't hope to escape the due penalty for killing Mr. Goodwin, but you accept it in order to save Mr. Barrow from the doom you think you have contrived for him. A desperate expedient but a passable one; but it's no good now because I have heard you. You can't kill me, too; you don't know where I am. Drop the gun. I will add that Mr. Goodwin has worked with me many years; I know him well; and I accept his conclusion that Mr. Barrow did not kill Wade Eisler. He is not easily gulled. Drop the gun."

I had stayed put, but it wasn't easy. Of course tingles were chasing up and down my spine, but worse than that I felt so damned silly, sitting there with my back to her while Wolfe made his speech. When he stopped it was too much. I swiveled. Her hand with the gun was resting on her knee, and she was staring at it, apparently wondering how it got there. I

covered the hole. "Archie, I got up and took it, an old snub-nosed Graber, and flipped the cylinder. Fully loaded. As I jiggled the cartridges out Wolfe entered from the hall. As he approached he spoke. "Archie. Does Mr. Barrow cherish this woman?"

"Sure he does. This could even key him up to mentioning it."

"Heaven help him." He glared down at her. "Madam, you are the most dangerous of living creatures. However, here you are, and I may need you." He turned his head and roared, "Fritz!" Fritz must have been in the hall; he appeared immediately. "This is Miss Laura Jay," Wolfe told him. "Show her to the south room, and when lunch is ready take her a tray."

"I'm going," Laura said. "I'm going to—I'm going."

"No. You'd be up to some mischief within the hour. I am going to expose a murderer, and I have accepted Mr. Goodwin's conclusion that it will not be Mr. Barrow, and you will probably be needed. This is Mr. Fritz Brenner. Go with him."

"But I must—"

"Confound it, will you go? Mr. Cramer would like to know why you came to see Mr. Goodwin. Do you want me to ring him and tell him?"

She went. I got her jacket

from the couch and handed it to Fritz, and he convoyed her out and to the elevator. Wolfe commanded me, "Get Mr. Dunning," and went to his desk and sat. I put the Graber and the cartridges in a drawer, looked in the book for the number of the Paragon Hotel, got at the phone, and dialed. The girl said Dunning's room didn't answer, and I asked her to have him paged. When he couldn't be found I left a message, and tried Madison Square Garden, and finally got him.

Wolfe took his phone. I stayed on mine. "Mr. Dunning? This is Nero Wolfe. We met yesterday at the home of Miss Lily Rowan. Miss Rowan has hired me to investigate what she calls an abuse of her hospitality—the death by violence of one of her guests—and I would like to see you. If you will please come to my office, say at a quarter-past two?"

"I can't," Dunning said. "Impossible. Anyway, I've told the police everything I know. I suppose Miss Rowan has a right to hire you if she wants to, but I don't see why . . . anyhow, I can't. It's a nightmare, this is, a nightmare, but we're going to have a performance tonight if I live that long."

"Murder hatches nightmares. Did you tell the police about

Miss Karlin's visit to Mr. Eisler's apartment Sunday night?"

Silence. Five seconds.

"Did you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That won't do, Mr. Dunning. I can ask the police that question if I must, but I would rather not. I would prefer to discuss it with you, and with Miss Karlin and Mr. Fox. If you will please be here with them at a quarter-past two? A yes or no will be sufficient. It might be unwise to discuss it on the phone."

Another silence. Six seconds.

"I'll be there."

"With Miss Karlin and Mr. Fox?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll expect you." He hung up and looked at me. "Archie. Will that woman try climbing out a window?"

"No. She's hooked."

"Very well." He looked up at the wall clock. "Lunch in forty minutes. Report."

When the company arrived I wasn't there to let them in. They came five minutes early, at ten after two, and I was upstairs with Laura Jay. The south room is two flights up, on the same floor as my room, in the rear, above Wolfe's room. I left the lunch table before Wolfe finished his coffee, and

mounted the two flights, partly to make sure she was still there, partly to see if she had eaten anything from the tray Fritz had taken up, and partly to tell her that Nan and Mel and Roger Dunning were expected and if Wolfe wanted her to join the party later I would either come and get her or send Fritz for her.

All three purposes were served. She was there, standing at a window, the sun setting fire to her honey-colored hair. There was only one Creole fritter left on the plate and no salad in the bowl. I had expected her to insist on going down with me instead of waiting for a summons, but she didn't. Just for curiosity I asked her if she had intended to pull the trigger as soon as I hung up or wait until I turned around, and she said I ought to know she wouldn't shoot a man in the back.

When I descended to the office they were there—Roger Dunning in the red leather chair, and Nan Karlin and Mel Fox in two of the yellow ones facing Wolfe's desk. When I entered and circled around them I got no glances; they were too intent on Wolfe, who was speaking.

“... and the source of my information is not important. If you persist in your denial you

will merely be postponing your embarrassment. The police have learned, not from me, that Eisler took a woman to his apartment Sunday night, and they are going over it for fingerprints. Almost certainly they will find some of yours, Miss Karlin, and Mr. Goodwin has told me that all of you permitted them to take samples last evening. You're in a pickle. If you refuse to discuss it with me I advise you to tell the police about it at once, before they confront you with it.”

Nan turned her head to look at Mel, and I had her full-face. Even without her pink silk shirt and Levis and boots, in a blouse and shirt and pumps, she would have been spotted by any New Yorker as an alien. The skin of a girl's face doesn't get that deep tone from week-ends at the beach or even a two weeks' trip to Bermuda.

Mel Fox, meeting her look, said, “What the hell.”

Nan went back to Wolfe. “Laura told you,” she said. “Laura Jay. She's the only one that knew about it except Roger Dunning and he didn't.”

“He says he didn't,” Mel said. His eyes went to Dunning. “You wouldn't be letting out anybody's cinch, would you, Roger?”

“Of course not,” Dunning said. It came out a little

squeaky, and he cleared his throat. His narrow, bony face was just a sliver. I have noticed over and over that under strain a fat face gets fatter and a long face gets longer. He asked Wolfe, "Did I tell you?"

"No." To Nan: "You say that Miss Jay and Mr. Dunning are the only ones who knew about it. When did you tell them?"

"Sunday night when I got back to the hotel. Laura's room is next to mine and I went in and told her. I thought I ought to tell Roger and so did she, and when I went to my room I phoned him and he came and I told him."

"Why him? Are you on terms of intimacy with him?"

"With <sup>er</sup> him? Good lord. Him?"

"The question arises. It is conceivable that he was so provoked by the outrage that he decided to kill Eisler, moved perhaps by an unavowed passion. Is it not?"

"Look at him," Nan said.

We did so. With no desire to slander him, it must be admitted that he didn't look like a man apt to burn with passion, avowed or unavowed.

"I never killed a man yet," he said. "Why Nan told me, she thought she ought to and she was absolutely right. It was partly my fault she had gone

with Eisler to his apartment, I had asked the girls to let him have a little rope as long as he didn't get too frisky, I knew they could take care of themselves, and Nan wanted to tell me that if he ever came near her again she would give him worse than a scratch, and I couldn't blame her."

"Why did you ask them to give him rope?"

"Well." Dunning licked his lips. "In a way I was hog-tied. If Eisler hadn't put up the money we wouldn't have made it to New York this year, or anyhow it wouldn't have been easy. I didn't know much about him when I first signed up with him except that he had the money. Anyhow, he was all right except with the girls, and I didn't know he was that kind. I knew if he didn't pull up there might be trouble, but I figured it wouldn't do any good to tell him so. What could I do? I couldn't fence him out. When Nan told me about Sunday night I thought that might stop him, it might show him that a girl that can handle a bronc can handle his kind."

"Did you tell him that?"

"No, I didn't. I hoped I wouldn't have to. But I decided I would keep my eyes open. Up there yesterday when I noticed he wasn't on the terrace I looked around for him some,

inside and outside. When I couldn't find him and I saw all the girls were there I thought he had up and gone, and that suited me fine."

"What time was that? When you looked around and couldn't find him?"

Dunning shook his head. "I can't make it close. The police wanted me to and I did the best I could, but all I can say, it wasn't long after Miss Rowan went in for some more coffee—maybe three minutes, maybe more than that. Then when I went back in after looking outside, Cal Barrow said his rope was gone and he was looking for it, and I wondered if Eisler had took it but I couldn't guess why."

"How many people did you tell about Miss Karlin's experience at Eisler's apartment?"

"How many?" Dunning frowned. "No people at all. What good would that do?"

"You told no one?"

"No."

"And you haven't told the police?"

"No." He licked his lips. "I figured it would just sick them on Nan, and I couldn't see any sense in that. What you asked her about her and me, there's nothing to that, she's just one of the girls, but I know her pretty well and she wouldn't kill a man just because he had

pawed at her. I'd like to ask you a question. You say Miss Rowan has hired you to investigate?"

"Yes."

"You weren't there when it happened, and neither was Goodwin. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"But Miss Rowan was, and she hires you. She's paying you. So you're not going to investigate *her*, naturally. I got the idea there yesterday that she didn't like Eisler any too well. I don't suppose you're interested in that? I suppose you think it has to be one of us, the boys and the girls and me?"

Wolfe grunted. He turned his head. "Archie. I haven't asked you. Did Miss Rowan kill Mr. Eisler?"

"No, sir."

"Then that's settled. Mr. Dunning, obviously it was one of you. By the way, Miss Karlin, I haven't asked you: did you kill Mr. Eisler?"

"No."

"Mr. Fox. Did you?"

"No."

"When did you first learn of Miss Karlin's visit to Eisler's apartment Sunday night?"

"Today. Two hours ago. Roger told me after you phoned him. If I'd knew about it Sunday night or yesterday morning Eisler wouldn't of got killed there yesterday because

he wouldn't have been there. He would of been in bed or maybe in the hospital."

"Then it's a pity you didn't know."

"Yeah. Roger told me because you told him to bring me along, he didn't know why and I don't either, but I can make a guess. You're a friend of Harvey Greve's."

"Mr. Goodwin is."

"Yeah. So Harvey tells him things. He tells him about Nan and me, that we're fixing to get hitched, which we are, and you—"

"Not Harvey," Nan said. "Laura. Laura told him. Because they've arrested Cal."

"All right, maybe Laura." Mel stared at Wolfe. "So that looks like a good setup. Eisler went after my girl and I killed him. So you tell Roger to bring me along. I understand you're about as slick as they come, you can bend a loop around a corner, but let's see you try. Here's Roger says he didn't tell anybody about Nan going there. Here's Nan says she didn't tell anybody but Laura and Roger. So I didn't know about it unless Eisler told me himself, and that don't seem practical, and he's dead. So here I am and it's your move."

*"You did know about it!"*

It was Laura Jay's voice and it came from the waterfall that

covered the hole, which was only a couple of arms' lengths from Roger Dunning, and he jerked around. I bounced up and started for the hall, but had got only halfway when here came Laura.

She went straight to Mel and stopped, facing him, and spoke. "You know about it because I told you." She turned to Wolfe: "Yesterday. I told him yesterday morning. I thought he—"

She was interrupted. Nan flew at her and smacked her on the side of the head.

Somehow when two women tie into each other it's harder to separate them than it is two men. It's not just that you don't want to hurt a woman if you can help it; they're actually more wriggly and you're more apt to get scratched or bit; and when it's two active cowgirls it's a real problem.

However, I had help. Roger and Mel were closer than I was, and Roger had Laura's shoulders, and Mel had Nan around the waist, when I reached them. They yanked them apart, and I merely stepped in between. Laura wriggled free from Roger, but I was there. Mel had Nan wrapped up.

"Pfui," Wolfe said. "Miss Jay, your talent for turmoil is extraordinary Archie, put her—"

"She's a liar," Nan said. She was panting a little, and her eyes were blazing. "I knew it was her. I knew she—"

"Hold it, Nan," Mel commanded her. His eyes were narrowed at Wolfe. "So you had it rigged good, huh? So you had her all primed, huh?"

"I did not," Wolfe was emphatic. "This is becoming farcical. You were right, up to a point, Miss Karlin. Miss Jay, concerned on account of Mr. Barrow, came to see Mr. Goodwin, to tell him of your experience at Eisler's apartment. She stated that you made her promise not to tell Mr. Fox, and that she had kept the promise. Thinking it well to have her at hand, I had her shown to a room upstairs and told her to stay there. Her abrupt entry surprised me as much as you. Miss Jay, did you tell Mr. Goodwin that you had not told Mr. Fox?"

"Yes." Laura's chin was up.

"But you now say you had?"

"Yes."

"Precisely where and when?"

"Yesterday morning in the hotel lobby after breakfast."

"You had breakfast with Mr. Barrow. Was he present?"

"No. He went to buy some cigarettes, and I saw Mel there and went and told him."

"Look here, Laura," Mel said. "Look at me."

Her head came around, slowly, and she met his eyes, straight.

"You know darned well that ain't so," he said. "This slicker talked you into it. He told you that was the way to get Cal out of trouble. Didn't he?"

"No."

"You mean you can stand there and look me in the eye and lie like that?"

"I don't know, Mel; I never tried."

"Listen, Laura," Roger Dunning said, to her back. "If it's on account of Cal, I don't think you have to. I've got a lawyer on it and he'll soon have him out on bail, thirty thousand dollars. He may be out already. They can't charge him with murder unless they can show some reason why he wanted to kill Eisler, and there wasn't any."

"It's not just her," Mel said. He had backed Nan up and moved in front of her. He turned to me. "You're slick too, huh?"

"Not very," I said. "I manage somehow."

"I bet you do. I bet you're pretty good at answering questions. What if I asked you where you was yesterday while someone was killing Eisler?"

"That's easy. I was driving a

car. Driving Mr. Wolfe home and then back to Sixty-third Street."

"Was anybody else along?"

"Nope. Just us two."

"Did you see anybody on the way that knows you?"

"No."

"Did anybody here see you except Wolfe?"

"No, I didn't come in. I wanted to get back in time for the roping—I mean the contest, not roping Eisler. You're asking pretty good questions, but you'll hit the same snag with me as with Cal Barrow. You'll have to show some reason why I wanted to kill Eisler."

"Yeah. Or why Wolfe would want you to, the man you work for. Or why that Miss Rowan would, the woman that's hired him." He turned to Wolfe. "You better look out with this Laura Jay. She ain't cut out for a liar." He turned to Laura. "I'll be having a talk with you, Laura. Private." He turned to Roger Dunning. "This lawyer you got to get bail for Cal, is he any good?"

Roger's long narrow face was even longer. "I think he's all right. He seems to know his way around."

"I want to see him. Come on, Nan. You come along. We're not going to get—"

The doorbell rang. Mel had Nan under control, so I went. A

glance through the glass of the front door showed me a hundred and ninety pounds of sergeant out on the stoop—Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide. I proceeded, put the chain bolt on, opened the door to the two-inch crack the chain permitted, and said politely, "No clues today. Out of stock."

"Open up, Goodwin." Like a sergeant. "I want Nan Karlin."

"I don't blame you. She's very attractive—"

"Can it. Open up. I've got a warrant for her and I know she's here."

There was no use making an issue of it, since there had probably been an eye on the house ever since Cramer left. As for the warrant, of course the prints she had left at Eisler's apartment had caught up with her. But Wolfe doesn't approve of cops' taking anyone in his house, no matter who. "What if you brought the wrong warrant?" I asked.

He got it from a pocket and stuck it through the crack, and I took it and looked it over. "Okay," I said, "but watch her, she might bite." Removing the chain, swinging the door open, and handing him the warrant as he crossed the sill, I followed him to the office. He didn't make a ceremony of it. He marched across to Nan, displayed the paper, and spoke.

"Warrant to take you as a material witness in the murder of Wade Eisler. You're under arrest. Come along."

My concern was Laura. As like as not, she would blurt out that he should take Mel too because she had told him about it, so I lost no time getting to her, but she didn't utter a peep. She stood stiff, her teeth clamped on her lip. Wolfe let out a growl, but no words. Nan gripped Mel's arm. Mel took the warrant, read it through, and told Stebbins, "This don't say what for."

"Information received."

"Where you going to take her?"

"Ask the District Attorney's office."

"I'm getting a lawyer for her."

"Sure. Everybody ought to have a lawyer."

"I'm going along."

"Not with us. Come on, Miss Karlin."

Wolfe spoke. "Miss Karlin. You will of course be guided by your own judgment and discretion. I make no suggestion. I merely inform you that you are under no compulsion to speak until you have consulted an attorney."

Stebbins and Mel Fox both spoke at once. Stebbins said, "She didn't ask you anything." Mel said, "You damn snake."

Stebbins touched Nan's elbow and she moved. I stayed with Laura as they headed out, Nan and Stebbins in front and Mel and Roger following; seeing them go might touch her off. She still had her teeth on her lip. When I heard the front door close I went and took a look and came back.

I expected to find Wolfe scowling at her, but he wasn't. He was leaning back with his eyes closed and his lips moving. He was pushing out his lips, puckered, and then drawing them in—out and in, out and in.

He only does that, and always does it, when he has found a crack somewhere, or thinks he has, and is trying to see through. I am not supposed to interrupt the process, so I crossed to my desk, but didn't sit, because Laura was still on her feet, and a gentleman should not seat himself when a lady or a wildcat is standing.

Wolfe opened his eyes. "Archie."

"Yes, sir."

"It would help to know whether Miss Jay had told Mr. Fox or not. Is there any conceivable way of finding out?"

I raised a brow. If that was the crack he had been trying to see through he was certainly hard up for cracks. "Not bare-handed," I said. "It would

take a scientist. I know where you can get one with a lie detector. Or you might try a hypnotist."

"Pfui. Miss Jay, which is it, now that Miss Karlin is in custody? Had you told Mr. Fox?"

"Yes."

"Yesterday morning in the hotel lobby?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you understand what that will let you in for—or rather, I suppose you don't. You will be—"

The phone rang. I got it. "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is Cal, Archie. Do you know where Laura is?"

"I might. Where are you?"

"I'm at the hotel. I'm out on bail. They say she went out this morning and she hasn't been back, and she's not at the Garden. I thought maybe she might have been to see you."

"Hold the wire a minute. I'll go to another phone."

I got my memo pad, wrote on it, *Cal Barrow out on bail looking for Laura, get him here & you can check her*, tore off the sheet, and handed it to Wolfe. He read it and looked up at the clock. His afternoon date with the orchids was at four.

"No," he said. "You can. Get her out of here. Of course you must see him first."

I resumed at the phone. "I think I know where to find her. It's a little complicated, and the best way—"

"Where is she?"

"I'll bring her. What's your room number?"

"Five-twenty-two. Where is she?"

"I'll have her there in half an hour, maybe less. Stay there."

I hung up and faced Laura. "That was Cal. He's out on bail and he wants to see you. I'll take—"

"Cal! Where is he?"

"I'll take you to him, but I'm going to see him first. I don't ask you to promise because you'd promise anything, but if you try any tricks I'll show you a new way to handle a calf. Where's your jacket?"

"It's upstairs."

"Go get it. If I went for it you might not be here when I came back."

The Paragon Hotel, around the corner from Eighth Avenue on 54th Street, not exactly a dump but by no means a Waldorf, is convenient for performers at the Garden. When Laura and I entered there were twenty or more cow-persons in the lobby, both male and female, some in costume and some not. We went to the elevator, and to my surprise she

stuck to the program as agreed on in the taxi, getting out at the fourth floor to go to her room. I stayed in, left at the fifth, found Room 522, knocked on the door, and it opened before I was through knocking.

"Oh," Cal said. "Where is she?"

He was still in the same outfit he had worn yesterday—bright blue shirt, blue jeans, fancy boots. His face wasn't any fresher than his clothes.

"She's in her room," I said. "She wanted to fix her hair. Before she joins us I want to ask you something. Do I see a chair in there?"

"Why, sure. Come on in and sit." He gave me room and I entered. There were two chairs, about all there was space for, what with the bed and chest of drawers and a little table. I took one. Cal stood and yawned, wide.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm a little short on sleep."

"So am I. Some things have been happening, but Laura can tell you about them. Miss Rowan has hired Nero Wolfe to investigate, and he knows about what you told me yesterday. Laura can tell you how he found out. I haven't told the cops or anyone else."

He nodded. "I figured you hadn't or they would have asked me. I guess you've got

your tongue in straight. I'm mighty glad. I guess I picked the right man to tell."

"Frankly, you could have done worse. Now you can tell me something else. Yesterday morning you met Laura downstairs and had breakfast with her. Remember?"

"Sure I remember."

"Mel Fox says that when you and Laura went into the lobby after breakfast you left her and went to the cigar counter to buy cigarettes, and he went and had a little talk with you. Remember that?"

"I don't seem to." He frowned. "I didn't buy no cigarettes. I got a carton here in my room. Mel must of got mixed up."

"I'd like to be sure about this, Cal. Go back to it, it was only yesterday. You and Laura had breakfast in the coffee shop?"

"Yes."

"Then you went into the lobby together. If you didn't leave her to buy cigarettes, maybe it was to buy a paper. The newsstand is—"

"Wait a minute. We didn't go into the lobby. We left the coffee shop by the street door. We went down to the Garden."

"Then it might have been when you came back. You went into the lobby then."

"We didn't come back. When

we left the Garden we went up to that Miss Rowan's. I guess you might tell me why this is so particular. What does Mel say we talked about?"

"You'll know pretty soon. I had to be sure—"

There was a knock at the door and he lost no time getting to it. It was Laura. She was running true to form. We had agreed on fifteen minutes, and it had been only ten. The reunion was mighty dramatic. Cal said, "Well, hello." Laura said, "Hello, Cal." He stood aside so she wouldn't have to brush against him.

I arose and said, "You fudged a little but I expected you to."

Cal shut the door and came and said, "Gosh, you look like you got throwed by a camel."

I took command. "Look," I told them, "when I leave you'll have all the time there is, but now I've got some talking to do and you can listen. Sit down."

"You've already talked," Laura said. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing yet but I'm going to. If you don't want to listen I know who will—Inspector Cramer if I phone him and say I'm ready to unload. Sit down!"

Laura sat in the other chair. Cal sat on the edge of the bed. "I guess you got the drop on us,

Archie," he said. "I hope you don't feel as mean as you sound."

"I don't feel mean at all." I sat. "I'm going to tell you a love story. I take valuable time to tell it because if I don't God only knows what Laura will be up to next. Yesterday she told you a colossal lie. Today she told me she killed Wade Eisler. Then she—shut up, both of you! Then she pointed a loaded gun at my back and would have plugged me if she hadn't been interrupted. Then she told another lie, trying to frame Mel Fox for the murder."

"No!" Laura cried. "That was the truth!"

"Nuts. You and Cal didn't go to the lobby after breakfast. You went to the Garden and from there to Miss Rowan's. You didn't tell Mel Fox what you said you did. You were framing him, or trying to."

"You're talking pretty fast," Cal said. "Maybe you'd better slow down and back it up a little. If you can. What was the lie she told me yesterday?"

"That she had gone to Eisler's apartment Sunday night. She hadn't. She has never been there. It was Nan Karlin that Eisler took there Sunday night, and Nan told Laura about it when she got back to the hotel. Laura told you she had been there for two reasons:

she didn't want to admit she had been careless about a horse and got her ear bruised, and the real reason, she hoped it would make you realize it was time to break out the bridle. All for love. You are her dream man. She wants to hook you. She wants you to take her for better or for worse, and she has done her damnedest to make it worse."

"I didn't say that!" Laura cried.

"Not in those words. Was that why you told him that lie or wasn't it? Try telling the truth once."

"All right, it was!"

Cal stood up. "You might go and leave us alone a while. You can come back."

"This is a respectable hotel. A gentleman isn't supposed to be in his room alone with a lady. I'll go pretty soon, after I fill in a little. Sit down. She came today and told me she killed Eisler because she thought you had—she still thinks so—and it was her fault and she wanted to take the rap. When I showed her that wouldn't work she took a gun from her bag—she had thoughtfully brought it along—when my back was turned, and got set to let me have it, the idea being that I was the only one who knew you had a motive. She can tell you why that

didn't work either. Then—"

"She wouldn't of shot you," Cal said.

"The hell she wouldn't. Then Mel and Nan and Roger came, and she got another idea. She announced that she had told Mel about Nan going to Eisler's place Sunday night, the idea being to give Mel a motive for killing Eisler. She said she told him yesterday morning when you and she went to the lobby after breakfast and you went to buy cigarettes. I have now stepped on that one." I turned to Laura. "You'd better see Mel and tell him. Tell him you had a fit."

I returned to Cal. "Of course that's fairly thick, trying to dump a murder on a guy, but after all, she would have dumped it on herself if she could. She tried that first, so I admit I should make allowances. I'm telling you all this for three reasons: first, so you'll know what she's capable of and you'll head her off. No one else can. If she keeps on having ideas there'll be hell to pay and you'll probably do the paying. Second, I want you both to realize that whoever killed Eisler is going to get tagged, and the sooner the better. It's one of six people: Nan Karlin, Anna Casadó, Harvey Greve, Mel Fox, and Roger Dunning and his wife. If you know of any

reason, anything at all, why one of them might have wanted Eisler dead, I expect you to tell me and tell me now."

"You say Laura still thinks I killed him," Cal said.

"She may be losing her grip on that. After the way her other ideas have panned out she must be shaky on that one." I looked at her. "Make it hypothetical, Laura. If Cal didn't, who did?"

"I don't know."

"What about Harvey Greve? He's a friend of mine, but I'll overlook that if he's it. Could he have had a motive?"

"I don't know."

"What about Roger Dunning? Did Eisler make passes at his wife?"

"If he did I never saw him. Neither did anybody else. She's not—well, you saw her—why would he? With all the girls to paw at. She must be nearly fifty."

Ellen Dunning probably wasn't a day over forty, but I admit she was a little faded. I turned to Cal. "Your turn. If you didn't kill him, who did?"

He shook his head. "You got me. Does it have to be one of them six?"

"Yes."

"Then I pass. I just couldn't guess."

"It will take more than a guess. My third reason for

taking up your time, not to mention mine: I wanted to have another look at you and listen to you some more. You're the only one with a known motive, and I'm the one that knows it. Nero Wolfe has bought my conclusion that you're out, and I haven't told the cops, and if I'm wrong I'm sunk. Besides, Laura would have the laugh on me, and I'd hate that. Did you kill him?"

"I'll tell you, Archie." He was actually grinning at me, and there was nothing but me between him and a murder trial. "I wouldn't want her to have the laugh on me, either. And she won't."

"Okay." I got up. "For God's sake, keep an eye on her. Do you know Harvey's room number?"

"Sure. He's down the hall, Five-thirty-one."

I went.

Knocking on the door of Room 531, first normal and then loud, got no result. I intended to see Harvey. He might be down in the lobby, and if he wasn't I would try the Garden. There was no hurry about getting back to the office, since it was only four thirty and Wolfe wouldn't be down from the plant rooms until six.

Taking the elevator down, I found that there were more

people in the lobby than when I came. Moving around, I didn't see Harvey, but I saw a man I knew, standing over in a corner chinning with a couple of cowboys. It was Fred Durkin. Fred, a free-lance, was second-best of the three operatives whom Wolfe considers good enough to trust with errands when we need help on a job. I looked at my watch: 4:34. Nearly an hour and a half since I had left with Laura, time enough for Wolfe to get Fred on the phone, brief him, and put him to work. Had he? Of course it could be that Fred was there on a job for one of the agencies that used him, but that would have been quite a coincidence and I don't like coincidences.

That question would have to wait for an answer. Knowing that Harvey Greve liked a drink when one was handy, I crossed the lobby and entered the bar. The crowd there was smaller but noisier. No Harvey, but there were booths along the wall, and I strolled back for a look, and found him. He was in a booth, deep in conversation with a man. Neither of them saw me; and I went on by, circled and backtracked, returned to the lobby, and on out to the street.

The man with Harvey was Saul Panzer. Saul is not only

the first-best of the three men Wolfe uses for errands, he is the best operative south of the North Pole. That settled it. Fred could have been a coincidence, but not both of them. Wolfe had got busy on the phone the minute I was out of the house, or darned soon after. What had stung him? No answer.

At Ninth Avenue I flagged a taxi. When I gave the hackie the number on West 35th Street, he said, "What a honor. Archie Goodwin in person. Your name in the paper again but no pitcher this time. Stranglin' a guy with a lasso right on Park Avenue, can you beat that? Whodunit?"

I'm all for fame, but I was too busy guessing to smirk.

The hackie had another honor coming. When the cab rolled to a stop in front of the old brownstone and I climbed out, a man appeared from behind a parked car and spoke to him. It was Sergeant Purley Stebbins. He said to the hackie, "Hold it, driver. Police." He said to me, "You're under arrest. I've got a warrant." He took a paper from a pocket and offered it.

He was enjoying it. He would have enjoyed even more to see me squirm, so I didn't. I didn't bother to look at the paper. "Information received?"

I asked politely. "Or just on general principles?"

"The Inspector will tell you. We'll use this cab. Get in."

I obeyed. He climbed in beside me and told the driver, "Two-thirty West Twentieth," and we rolled.

I chose to snub him. He was of course expecting me to try some appropriate cracks, so of course I didn't. I didn't open my trap from the time I climbed in the cab until he ushered me into the office of Inspector Cramer, which is on the third floor of the dingy old building that houses the precinct. I didn't open it even then. I waited until I was in a chair at the end of Cramer's desk, and he said, "I've been going over your statement, Goodwin, and I want to know more about your movements yesterday afternoon. The District Attorney does, too, but I'll have a go at it first. You left with Wolfe, to drive him home, at twelve minutes after three. Right?"

I spoke. "It's all in my statement, and I answered a thousand questions, some of them a dozen times. That's enough. I am now clamping, unless and until you tell me why I am suddenly grabbed. If you think you dug up something, what?"

"That will develop as we go

along. You left with Wolfe at three twelve?"

I leaned back and yawned.

He regarded me. He looked up at Stebbins, who was standing. Stebbins said, "You know him. He hasn't said a word since I took him."

Cramer looked at me. "A woman phoned headquarters this afternoon and said she saw you there yesterday at half-past three on the terrace in the rear of the penthouse. She was sure about the time. She didn't give her name. I don't have to tell you that if Wolfe came home in a taxi we'll find the driver. You left with him at three twelve?"

"Thanks for the warning. What time did the woman phone?"

"Three thirty-nine."

I looked at it. Laura and I had got to the hotel about twenty-five to four. The first thing on my program when I got loose would be to wring her neck and toss her in the river. "Okay," I said, "naturally you're curious. You say the D.A. is, too, so it will be a long discussion. I'll talk after I make a phone call. May I use your phone?"

"In my hearing?"

"Certainly, it's your phone."

He moved it across and I got it and dialed. Fritz answered and I asked him to buzz the plant rooms. After a wait

Wolfe's voice came, cranky, as it always is when he is interrupted up there.

"Yes?"

"Me. I'm with Cramer in his office. When I got home Stebbins was waiting for me out front with a warrant. A woman, name unknown, phoned the police that she saw me at half-past three yesterday afternoon on Miss Rowan's terrace. If you think you'll need me tomorrow you'd better get Parker. Of the two contradictory statements you sent me to check, the first one is true. Tell Fritz to save some of the veal knuckle for me for tomorrow."

"At half-past three yesterday afternoon you were with me in the car."

"I know it, but they don't. Cramer would give a month's pay to prove I wasn't."

I hung up and sat back. "Where were we? Oh, yes. I left with Mr. Wolfe at three twelve. Next question?"

At 10:39 Wednesday morning, standing at the curb on Leonard Street waiting for an empty taxi, I said to Nathaniel Parker, the lawyer, "It's a dirty insult. Did you say five hundred?"

He nodded. "It is rather a slap, isn't it? As your attorney, I could hardly suggest a higher figure. And of course the cost

will be much—here comes one." He stepped off the curb and raised an arm to stop an approaching cab.

The insult, having my bail set at a measly five C's, one-sixtieth of Cal Barrow's, was merely an insult. The injuries were what I would someday, preferably that one, get even for. I had spent fourteen hours in a detention room with too much heat and not enough air; I had asked for corned-beef sandwiches and got ham and rubbery cheese; I had been asked the same question over and over by four different county and city employees, none of whom had a sense of humor; I had been served lukewarm coffee in a paper thing that leaked; I had not been allowed to use the phone; I had been told three times to take a nap on a bumpy couch and had been roused for more questions just as I was fading out; and I had been asked to sign a statement that had four mistakes in content, three misspelled words, and five typographical errors.

And at the end of it all, which must have cost the taxpayers at least a thousand bucks, counting overhead, they were exactly where they had been when they started.

After climbing out of the taxi in front of the old

brownstone and thanking Parker for the lift, I mounted the stoop, let myself in, and headed for the office to tell Wolfe that I would be available as soon as I had showered, shaved, brushed my teeth, cleaned my nails, brushed my hair, dressed, and had breakfast. It was five minutes past eleven, so he would be down from the plant rooms.

But he wasn't. The overgrown chair behind his desk was empty. Four of the yellow chairs were grouped in front of his desk, facing it, and Fritz was emerging from the front room carrying two more of them. On the couch at the far side at right angles to my desk two people sat holding hands—Cal Barrow and Laura Jay. As I entered Cal jerked his hand away and stood.

"We came a little early," he said. "We thought you might tell us what's up."

"Roping contest," I said. "I run down the block and you snare me from the stoop. Orchids for prizes." I turned to Fritz. "There's a mermaid in the sink." I wheeled and went to the kitchen, and in a moment he came.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"In his room with Saul and Fred. Your tie's crooked, Archie, and your—"

"I fell off a horse. Having a party?"

"Yes, Mr. Wolfe—"

"What time?"

"I was told they would come at half-past eleven. The lady and gentleman on the couch—"

"Came early to hold hands. Excuse my manners, I spent the night with louts and it rubbed off on me. I've got to rinse it off. Could you possibly bring up toast and coffee in eight minutes?"

"Easy. Seven. Your orange juice is in the refrigerator." He went to the range.

I got the glass of juice from the refrigerator, got a spoon and stirred it, took a healthy sip, and headed for the hall and the stairs. One flight up, the door of Wolfe's room was at the left, but I kept going and mounted another flight to my room, which was to the right, at the front of the house.

Ordinarily, what with my personal morning fog, it takes me around forty minutes to get rigged for the day, but that time I made it in thirty, with time out for the juice, toast and jam, and coffee. When Fritz came with the tray I asked him to tell Wolfe I was there, and he said he had done so on his way up, and Wolfe was pleased. I don't mean Wolfe said he was pleased; Fritz said he was. Fritz thinks he is a diplomat. At 11:42, cleaner and neater but not gayer, I went down.

They were all there, all of Lily's Monday luncheon guests but Wade Eisler. Lily was in the red leather chair. Cal and Laura were still on the couch, but not holding hands. The other six were on the yellow chairs—Mel Fox, Nan Karlin, and Harvey Greve in front, and Roger Dunning, his wife, and Anna Casado in the rear. Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin were off at the side, over by the big globe.

Wolfe, at his desk, was speaking as I entered. He stopped to dart a glance at me. I halted and inquired politely. "Am I intruding?"

Lily said, "You look pretty spruce for a man who spent the night in jail."

Wolfe said, "I have told them why you were delayed. Now that you're here I'll proceed." As I circled around the company to get to my desk he went on, to them, "I repeat, I have been employed by Miss Rowan and am acting in her interest, but I am solely responsible for what I am about to say. If I defame I alone am liable; she is not. You are here at my invitation, but you came, of course, not to please me but to hear me. I won't keep you longer than I must."

"We have to be at the Garden by a quarter after one," Roger Dunning said. "The show starts at two."

"Yes, sir, I know." Wolfe's eyes went right and then left. "I think it likely that one of you won't be there. I am not prepared to say to one of you, 'You killed Wade Eisler and I can prove it,' but I can offer a suggestion. All of you had the opportunity and the means; you were there, the steel rod was there, the rope was there. None of you was eliminated with certainty by a check of your movements. I made no such check, but the police did, and at that sort of thing they are inimitable. So it was a question of motive, as it often is."

He pinched his nose with a thumb and forefinger, and I suppressed a grin. He is convinced that when a woman is present, let alone four of them, the air is tainted with perfume. Sometimes it is, naturally, but not then and there. I have a good nose and I hadn't smelled any on the cowgirls, and you have to get a good deal closer to Lily than Wolfe was to catch hers. But he pinched his nose.

He resumed. "From the viewpoint of the police two facts pointed to Mr. Barrow: it was his rope and he found the body. Rather, it seemed to me, they pointed away from him, but let that pass. He had a motive, but no one knew it but

Miss Jay and Mr. Goodwin. If the police had known it he would have been charged with murder. I learned of it only yesterday, and I ignored it because Mr. Goodwin told me to. He was convinced that Mr. Barrow was innocent, and he is not easy to convince. Mr. Barrow, you and I are in his debt—you because he saved you from a mortal hazard, and I because he saved me from wasting time and trouble on you."

"Yes, sir," Cal said. "That's not all I owe him." He looked at Laura, and for a second I thought he was going to take her hand in public, but he reined in.

"I also learned yesterday," Wolfe went on, "that Miss Karlin had a motive, and, according to Miss Jay that Mr. Fox had one. But later Miss Jay recanted. Miss Jay, did you tell Mr. Fox of Miss Karlin's experience at Eisler's apartment?"

"No. I must have been—"

"The 'no' is enough. But you did phone the police yesterday that you saw Mr. Goodwin on Miss Rowan's terrace at half-past three Monday afternoon?"

"What?" Laura stared. "I never phoned the police anything!"

"You must have. It is of no consequence now, but—"

"I phoned the police," Ellen Dunning said. "I phoned them and told them that because it was true, and I thought they ought to know."

"But you didn't identify yourself."

"No, I didn't. I was afraid to. I didn't know what they might do because I hadn't told about it before. But I thought they ought to know."

I wouldn't have dreamed that the day would ever come when I would owe Laura an apology.

"I doubt," Wolfe said, "if you have earned their gratitude. Certainly not mine or Mr. Goodwin's. To go back to Mr. Fox—by the way, Miss Karlin, you were released on bail this morning?"

"Yes," Nan said.

"You were questioned at length?"

"I certainly was."

"Did they worm it out of you that you had told Mr. Fox of your visit to Eisler's apartment?"

"Of course not! I *hadn't* told him! He didn't know until yesterday!"

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Do you confirm that, Mr. Fox?"

"I sure do." Mel was on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his head tilted up. "If this is the suggestion you said

you'd offer you can stick it somewhere."

"It isn't. I'm merely clearing away the brush. Even if you and Miss Karlin are lying, if she did tell you, it can't be proven. Therefore it is impossible to establish a motive for you. No, that is not my suggestion. I only—"

"Wait a minute," Roger Dunning blurted. "I've held off up to now, but I might have known I couldn't forever. I told Mel about it—about Nan going to Eisler's place and what he did."

"When?"

"I told him Sunday night. I thought he ought to know because I knew he—"

"You're a dirty liar. Get on your feet." Mel was on his. Dunning's chair was right behind his, and Mel had turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, Mel," Dunning said. "I'm damn sorry, but you can't expect—"

"On your feet!"

"That won't help any—"

Mel smacked him on the jaw with his open hand, his right, and his left was on the way to countersmack him as his head swayed, but Saul Panzer and Fred Durkin were there. I was up, but they were closer. They got his arms and backed him up and turned him, and Wolfe spoke.

"If you please, Mr. Fox. I'll deal with him. I know he's lying."

Mel squinted. "How the hell do you know he's lying?"

"I know a cornered rat when I see one. Move your chair and sit down. Saul, see if Mr. Dunning has a weapon. We don't need any melodrama."

Dunning was on his feet, eyes focused on Wolfe. "You said Miss Rowan's not responsible," he said, louder than necessary. "You said you are." He turned to Lily. "You hired him. I advise you to fire him quick."

Lily looked at me. I shook my head. Fred moved behind Dunning and took his arms, and Saul went over him. Mel Fox moved his chair away and sat. Cal said something to Laura, and Anna Casado spoke to Harvey Greve. Saul turned and told Wolfe, "No gun."

Dunning said to his wife, "Come on, Ellen, we're going." She reached and grabbed his sleeve.

Wolfe spoke. "You are not going, Mr. Dunning. When you do go you will be under escort. I repeat, I can't say to you, 'You killed Wade Eisler and I can prove it,' but I do say that the probability of your guilt is so great that I stake my reputation on it. I must confess that this is impetuous, but your

motive couldn't be established without warning you; and I wished to gratify a caprice of my client, Miss Rowan, who invited me to her table for a memorable meal. She wants to deliver you to the District Attorney. Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin will go along to give him some information they have gathered. You are going willy-nilly. Do you want to challenge me here and now?"

Dunning turned his head to see where his chair was, and sat. He pulled his shoulders up and lifted his chin. "What information?" he asked.

"I'll tell you its nature," Wolfe said. "I doubt if the District Attorney would want me to give you the particulars. But first, what fixed my attention on you? You did—something that you said when you were here yesterday morning. I didn't worm it out of you, you volunteered it, that on Monday at Miss Rowan's place you noticed that Mr. Eisler wasn't on the terrace and you looked around for him, inside and outside. I asked you when, and you said—I quote you verbatim: 'It wasn't long after Miss Rowan went in for some more coffee—maybe three minutes, maybe more than that.' That was entirely too pat, Mr. Dunning. You were accounting for your absence in

case it had been remarked by anyone, and more important, you were accounting for your appearance in the rear of the penthouse in case you had been observed. And you did it gratuitously; I hadn't asked for it."

"I said it because it was true." Dunning licked his lips.

"No doubt. But it suggested the question, what if, instead of looking for him, you were killing him? What if, having got the rope from the closet and concealed it under your jacket, you got Eisler to go with you to that shack on some pretext, or to meet you there? That attracted me. Of the persons there you were the only one whose absence during that period could be established; you yourself avowed it. But then the question, what impelled you? Had you had a cogent motive? To avenge his misconduct with Miss Karlin or with another woman or women?"

Wolfe shook his head. "That seemed unlikely, though not impossible. More probably it had been some other factor of your relations with him. But when I put Mr. Panzer and Mr. Durkin on your trail I told them to explore all avenues, and they did so. They found no hint that you had a personal interest in any of the young

women Mr. Eisler had pestered, but they gathered facts that were highly suggestive. By the way, a detail: on the phone last evening I asked Miss Rowan if you knew of that shack in the rear of the penthouse, and she said that you not only knew of it, you had been in it. You went there on Sunday to make sure that the terrace would be cleared of obstructions so the ropes could be manipulated, and she took you to the shack to see the grouse that were hanging there. Is that correct, Miss Rowan?"

Lily said yes. She didn't look happy. Since it was beginning to look as if she was going to get her money's worth, she should have been pleased, but she didn't look it.

"That's a lie," Dunning said. "I didn't know about that shack. I never saw it."

Wolfe nodded. "You're desperate. You knew I wouldn't arrange this gathering unless I had discovered something of consequence, so you start wriggling; you try to implicate Mr. Fox, your word against his—then you deny you knew of the shack, your word against Miss Rowan's. Indeed, you started wriggling yesterday, when you had your wife phone the police in an effort to implicate Mr. Goodwin. Probably you have learned that

something has been taken from your hotel room. Have you inspected the contents of your suitcase since ten o'clock last evening? The old brown one in the closet that you keep locked?"

"No," Dunning swallowed. "Why should I?"

"I think you have. I have reason to believe that an envelope now in my safe came from that suitcase. I have examined its contents, and while they don't prove that you killed Wade Eisler they are highly suggestive of a possible motive. I said I'll tell you the nature of the information I have but not the particulars. However, you may have one detail."

Wolfe's head turned. "Mr. Greve. You told Mr. Panzer that in the past two years you have purchased some three hundred horses, two hundred steers and bulls, and a hundred and fifty calves, in behalf of Mr. Dunning. Is that correct?"

Harvey didn't look happy either. "That's about right," he said. "That's just rough figures."

"From how many different people did you buy them?"

"Maybe a hundred, maybe more. I scouted around."

"How did you pay for them?"

"Some I gave them a check,

but mostly cash. They like cash."

"Your own checks?"

"Yes. Roger made deposits in my account, eight or ten thousand dollars at a time, and I paid out of that."

"Did Mr. Dunning tell you not to divulge the amounts you paid for the animals?"

Harvey screwed up his mouth. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I, but I am earning a fee. You are exposing a man who made you a party to a swindle and who is almost certainly a murderer. Did he tell you not to divulge the amounts?"

"Yes, he did."

"Has anyone asked you to?"

"Yes. Wade Eisler. About ten days ago. I told him Roger had all the records and he'd have to ask him."

"Did you tell Mr. Dunning that Mr. Eisler had asked you?"

"Yes."

"That's a lie," Dunning said.

Wolfe nodded. "Again one person's word against yours. But I have the envelope, and I have the names of three other men who have made purchases for you under similar arrangements, and Mr. Durkin and Mr. Panzer have spoken with them. Two of them were asked for figures recently by Wade Eisler, as was Mr. Greve. I don't know how much you cheated Eisler

out of, but from the contents of the envelope I surmise that it was many thousands." His head turned. "Saul and Fred, you will escort Mr. Dunning to the District Attorney's office and deliver the envelope and the information you have collected. Archie, get the envelope from the safe."

I moved. As I passed behind Dunning's chair he started up, but Saul's hand on one shoulder and Fred's on the other stopped him. As I opened the safe door Wolfe said, "Give it to Saul. Miss Rowan, do you want Mr. Goodwin to phone the District Attorney to expect you?"

I had never seen Lily so completely got. "Good lord," she said, "I didn't realize. You couldn't drag me. I wish I hadn't . . . No, I don't . . . but I didn't realize how—how *hard* it is."

"You're not going?"

"Of course not!"

"You, Mr. Greve? You might as well. If you don't you'll be sent for later."

"Then I'll go later." Harvey was on his feet. "We've got a show on." He looked at Cal and Mel. "What about it? Think you can handle a calf if I hold his tail?"

"But we can't," Nan Karlin said. "We can't just go and—we can't!"

"The hell we can't," Cal said.

"Come on, Laura."

One snowy morning in January I got a letter from Cal that read:

Dear Archie:

You used them two dots like that when you wrote me on the typewriter so if you can I can. I read in the paper today about Roger Dunning getting convicted and Laura said I ought to write you and I said she ought to and she said did I want her

writing letters to the man she should have married instead of me: and so it went. Remember when I said about that blowout I didn't want to stink it up, well it sure got stunk up. We are making out pretty well here in Texas but it is cold enough to freeze the tits on a steer if he had any. Laura says to give you her love but don't believe it. Best regards.

Yours truly:  
Cal



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# Philip Wylie

## Not Easy To Kill (The Trial of Mark Adams)

*Captain Ross, master of the transatlantic luxury liner Ilvania, was disturbed. He scented trouble—or worse. Twice since the Ilvania started back to the United States, the multimillionaire Emerson Stickney had nearly been killed.*

*Accidents? Attempts at murder? Everyone aboard was tense, apprehensive—as if the crew and all the passengers were feeling some sort of psychic expectation of disaster . . .*

*Meet an interesting cast of characters in this short novel, complete in this volume: the pompous Senator Prichard; mysterious biochemist, Dr. Moklokus, ambitious, scheming Senor Centora; Stickney's breathtakingly beautiful secretary, Marian Bates; and young Mark Adams, the ship's doctor, who finds himself in an incredible situation that compels him to combine detecting with doctoring . . .*

### Detective: DR. MARK ADAMS

Captain Ross, master of the Ilvania, walked along her boat deck through the warm and sluggish night. Smoke from the cherry-red tip of his cigar eddied behind him. Overhead, smoke also streamed from the two funnels of the passenger ship.

The Captain walked quietly, in a vague after-dinner mood. He was not thinking concretely but, rather, wondering and worrying. Presently he stopped.

Standing near one of the lifeboats was Dr. Adams, the ship's surgeon. A young man. He had taken off his hat. An aura of radiance from the deck below silhouetted his long nose, his sharp chin, his firm lips, the wind-stirred crest of his curly hair. The Captain had resented his youth when he had taken him aboard in New York. He had grumbled to the First Officer, "Doesn't even look like an intern."

But Dr. Adams had been polite, competent, and popular.

Popular. The Captain thought about that. Popular with the passengers. Popular in Paris with Miss Marian Bates. She had fallen in love with him—and probably he had with her.

Ordinarily the Captain would not have considered it a concern of his. Young people fall in love. But Marian Bates was the private secretary of Emerson Stickney. Because she was infatuated with the Ilvania's doctor, she had arranged that Stickney should return to America on that ship.

Perhaps Stickney had known. Perhaps not. Stickney was a rich and powerful man. His presence on the Ilvania had attracted other personages who wished to confer with him in the leisure of sea voyaging: Dr. Moklokus, who was president of the Stickney Research Foundation; Senator Prichard; Hypolito Centora, a South American millionaire.

Captain Ross would ordinarily have been glad to have Emerson Stickney aboard. Stickney held a controlling interest in the shipping company which owned the Ilvania, and Captain Ross had become his friend in the course of many crossings.

Indeed, years before, when Ross had been a Third Officer,

Stickney had found beneath his silent and taciturn exterior a well-informed and imaginative mind. And, although no mention had ever been made of the fact, Ross had discovered himself master of a ship soon after. Thus, the voyage might have been felicitous.

But there had been trouble. A scent of trouble. It hung now in the heavy, heated night. It seemed to breathe a melancholy uncertainty into the music of the dance orchestra. It was really nothing—but it had infected all the passengers with an unnatural tenseness, a psychic expectation of disaster.

Captain Ross was a large and squarely made man. One would not have believed him attuned to inflections that had almost no existence. But he had spent his life on ships, at sea. He had developed a sixth sense. Or a seventh.

The doctor turned from the rail and stuffed tobacco into a short pipe. He saw the Captain.

"Good evening, sir."

"Evening, Doctor." The Captain slowly crossed the boat deck, and the two men stood together. The Ilvania slid a few hundred yards toward America, carrying its people and its music.

"About that leak," the Captain said finally.

"That's what was on my

mind," the young man answered. "A coil in a refrigerator can break down—as that one did. It lets out a poisonous gas. And if a nearby ventilation tube has become disjointed through wear, it will carry the gas into whatever stateroom it serves."

There was a pause. "Stickney wasn't harmed?"

"Not a bit. A light sleeper, I presume. If it had been carbon monoxide, it would have killed him. Sulphur dioxide merely woke him up."

The Captain nodded. "It looked accidental."

"Exactly."

"I hadn't told you that Stickney was almost killed—again accidentally—when he came aboard?"

The doctor's face turned quickly toward the Captain. "No, sir. You hadn't."

"He was coming up the gangplank. There was a pile of trunks on A deck. One of them slid overboard."

"And barely missed him, eh?"

"I didn't see it happen. He glanced up, I'm told, as if he had heard it begin to slide. He dodged it. Nobody was seen near the trunks—they formed a regular labyrinth. And—again—one of them *could* have become unbalanced."

"I suppose men like Stickney have enemies."

The ship's master shrugged. "Their millions make them... Have you discussed the matter with Miss Bates?"

"Only casually. I—"

There was a silence. "You were going to say—?"

"I was going to say"—the younger man's voice took on a deliberately steadied quality—"that I'm afraid, Captain, I've fallen pretty thoroughly in love with that girl. I met her, as you may know, in Paris. I believe"—his confusion increased—"she persuaded Mr. Stickney to take the Ilvania on my account. You see, we are planning to get married—sometime soon."

The Captain said, "Hunh!" and smoked. Then he continued, "I wouldn't like to have anything happen to Stickney on board my ship. Maybe the trunk and the leaking gas were accidents. But I don't think so. When casual news makes the hair on the back of your neck creep—"

Dr. Adams nodded.

In a stateroom on A deck Marian Bates was standing in front of a mirror. She was singing softly to herself. A brunette with black eyes and white skin. Acquisitive, passionate, composed—a person of flickering inner thoughts, who looked both bold and secretive.

She was about twenty-two

or three. If Stickney had been less powerful and more quick to anger, if Miss Bates had been less poised, her position as his secretary might have caused comment. She was extravagantly beautiful.

There was a knock at her door. She said, "Come in," so melodiously that it was almost a part of her song.

The door opened. Emerson Stickney stood there, grinning. He was tall, broad, hard, tanned, grizzled. A man of fifty, with flashing eyes, beetling brows, and a jaw like a weapon. He wore a dinner jacket. His grin, which had been merry and faintly satanic, ebbed into boyishness.

"You don't need to decorate yourself for the doctor. Nature did better than all the dress-makers on earth could."

"Thanks."

He walked into the room. "Serious about him, aren't you?"

She looked at Stickney. The man of silent might. The man for whom Presidents sent. The man to whom the twanging accent of his native Maine still stuck.

"The doctor is mine—forever," the girl said.

His smile dropped. His brows knit. "Mean it, don't you?"

"I mean it." "I hope you're right. I don't

want to see a good secretary throw herself away. And you'll be quite a responsibility. Have you told him just how much of a responsibility?" His grin returned.

"No."

"How bad a disposition you have—?"

"No."

"Better do it. Or I will. I want to talk to him, anyway."

"You let me do all the talking."

Stickney laughed boyishly. "I would if you told the truth. But I saw you last night. Kissing, my dear, is not talking. All right. He looks good. His stock's old and sound—you can tell that from his face. He started at the bottom. So did I. If he's good enough for you, you'll get my blessing."

The girl walked up to Stickney, kissed him lightly on the forehead, and said, "I'd marry him in a minute without it, you know."

Dr. Adams and Marian Bates stood in the bow of the ship with their arms around each other. "I wouldn't want you to go on working for Stickney," he said. "But my salary is terribly small. You could have a little apartment, and three meals a day. Maybe one canary—and that's about all."

"It would be—plenty."

He kissed her; then he said, "I've been meaning to ask you—about your parents. I know your mother is dead—"

"I was born in Chicago," she replied, "and the less we say about my family the better. Mind?"

"No."

"What about yours?"

"Poor," he said. "I guess I've always wanted to be a doctor. It's not easy to work your way through college and medical school, but I was lucky. A couple of doctors and a couple of professors helped me. I wanted to do research. But when my internship ended—I had to eat. One of my faculty friends heard of this job. Some day we'll hang out a shingle and go into the real surgery business."

Marian touched his cheeks softly with her lips. "And we'll hope that rich people get in automobile accidents outside our door every day."

They laughed. They were in love. They were being sweet and gentle and kind to each other. Their words were full of desire. But in the dark over the ship hung the sword which the Captain had detected, and now the young doctor felt it.

"I meant to ask you. Did either you or Mr. Stickney ever think that the gas which leaked into his room the other night

might have been no accident?" "I don't think so. No."

"Did you know that a trunk fell overboard and nearly hit him as he came up the gangplank?"

"He mentioned it."

"I suppose a man like Stickney has hundreds of enemies."

"If he has," she answered, "it's because his enemies are crooks or cowards or thieves. He's a pretty swell person." She considered. "Of course, people have tried to kill him in the past. He isn't easy to kill."

"Not very comforting."

"I don't think there's anything in the idea." She observed that another couple were strolling along the deck, toward the bow. "Let's go and see how the bridge game is progressing."

In the smoking room Stickney was playing bridge. Stickney's partner was Dr. Moklukus. A huge, bald, pallid man with slate-colored eyes. They played against the booming-voiced Senator Prichard and sleek, gray-haired Senor Centora.

As Stickney's secretary and the doctor entered, they were settling their debts. Senor Centora and the Senator had taken out pens. "One thousand two hundred and ten, eh?" the Senator said cheerfully.

Dr. Adams flinched a little. The sum would have meant much to him.

Pens scratched.

Stickney looked gleefully at his companions. He winked at the pale Rumanian who headed his institute. "The doctor, here, knows psychology. And I know burglary. You gentlemen shouldn't have asked us to play." He turned. "Hello, Miss Bates, Doctor. How's the weather?"

"Hot," Marian answered, "and gloomy."

Stickney looked at his check and folded it. "We had a fine game."

"And a fine conversation," Dr. Moklokus added. "Emerson and I confounded our opponents throughout the game by talking about murder."

The eyes of the celebrated savant met those of the humbler member of his profession. "You're a doctor. You could have contributed. We four have been trying to decide the best method of killing a person without being detected. I suggested an overlong exposure to radiation. A needle in the medulla. Aconite. The Senator was more brutal; Senor Centora appallingly sadistic. And Emerson merely contented himself by telling of a few murders he's known of in the Orient."

The men had turned their chairs. Dr. Adams brought two more for Marian and himself. He had a feeling that in this conversation dwelt the essence of the Captain's intangible worries. Behind the macabre entertainment was—what?

Not murder.

A rich and politically important South American gentleman. A Senator. A world-famous doctor. Not murderers.

The young man smiled. "I'm afraid I haven't any ideas," he said. "Murder is the one thing I'd be scared to try."

"But supposing," Dr. Moklokus continued, "you had to murder someone? What method would you choose—if it were only a matter of that choice?"

Stickney leaned forward. "Exactly."

"Well—then—I'd get my victim alone—and kill him—and deny it afterward. Take him hunting and shoot him, and swear it was an accident."

He again looked at the three men who had been playing bridge with Stickney. "Or take him out on deck and push him overboard."

"This," Marian said suddenly, "is my idea of a dull conversation."

She rose, and as the others stood, Stickney touched the arm of the ship's doctor. "Like to see you in my stateroom."

Both men excused themselves. When they were out on deck Stickney said, "Wanted to talk to you. Here." He unlocked a door that opened directly from the deck.

His stateroom was large and impressive. Queens had occupied that stateroom—and princes—and gamblers.

Stickney drew up chairs beside a table. He said to the young doctor, "Sit."

Mark Adams, M.D., a bright young man with slim prospects. Emerson Stickney, for whom Presidents sent when there were crises in Central America.

"My secretary tells me that she wants to marry you."

Mark Adams nodded. "I want to marry her. I love her."

"She is an extraordinary girl. I'm very fond of her. She's been with me as my secretary for three years. She has brains."

"I know it. I don't deserve a girl like that. I have ambitions, naturally. I think I will do some decent surgery someday. And I have a few ideas I'd like to work out by clinical and laboratory investigation."

"Suppose I told Moklokus to give you a job?"

The young man shook his head. "It would be immensely generous of you. But I've made every inch of my way so far in this world, Mr. Stickney. And I couldn't take a job now from

the employer of the girl I'm going to steal from him."

"Where'd you go to college?"

"Yale."

"Work your way through?"

"Yes."

"And through medical school?"

"Cornell."

"And now you want to marry this girl. To stow her in a little apartment in New York while you commute back and forth across the Atlantic in order to earn her a few cheap dresses a year and three meals a day she cooks for herself."

"It won't always be just that. But I intend to begin exactly like that—if she's willing."

Stickney grunted. "All right. I'm glad you're determined. You see, I'm pretty keen not to have Miss Bates marry a wrong guy. I like you. I like what you've done in your life so far. But to get and keep a girl with her spirit you'll have to accomplish more."

"I know it."

"All right. How would you like to do a favor for me?"

"I'd like to."

Stickney took a cigar from a humidor on the table. He lighted it attentively. "Mark," he said, producing with that word almost as much shock as he did with those that followed,

"what do you think my chances are of getting off this boat alive?"

The doctor paused and returned the steady gaze. "Then the trunk—the refrigerator leak—weren't accidental?"

"I think not."

"Who's doing it?"

Stickney shrugged. "I wish I knew. Who? A hired thug in the crew? A passenger? I don't know. A friend? Somebody is trying to kill me. They have been for the last two weeks I was in Europe. If I were killed now there would be the devil to pay. My holdings—my interest—they'd need a steady rein. And I'd want my murderer caught—because otherwise he—or she—might go on doing harm."

Mark Adams was breathing tensely and slowly. "I see. I'll stand by when I'm not on duty. I'll speak to the Captain and he'll set up a guard."

"It isn't just for the moment that I'm thinking, Mark. You can guard me now. But when I get off the ship—well, when and if it comes I want to have a strong, intelligent hand behind my estates. And I want my death avenged."

"I'm afraid I don't know enough about you, or your business, to help. And if you expect this sort of thing, I think it would be better to take steps to prevent it."

"Can't. Not my way of life. I can't go hiding around, and wearing bulletproof vests, and getting people to taste my food." Stickney chuckled. "Listen, Mark. All this may be wrong. We may catch some annoyed ex-employee of mine who has been sniping at me. I doubt it. What I want to do is to give you the funds, the power, and the authority to act for me if anything does happen. You don't know much about me—but Marian does. So I want you to have my power of attorney. To be my chief executor."

Mark sat still. He stared at Stickney.

"I'm not insane," the older man said.

"I wasn't thinking that."

"You were—but we'll let it pass. Snap judgments of men have got me my best assistants. I think you have what it takes. You've got nerve—surgeons have to have it. You're sensitive. They have to be. Yesterday I radioed for a report on your work at school and as an intern. Dr. Spelman Grant, at the Medical Center, said you were the best man they'd turned out in ten years. That's more than enough. Now, I'm asking you if you will take over my whole estate and distribute it as I arranged—in case I am killed. Will you?"

The young doctor waited for a full minute. Then he said, "If you want me to—and if you think I can do it."

"Good. Because, Mark, you'd have to anyway—if you married Marian."

"I'm afraid I don't follow that."

"She's my daughter."

Stickney sat back, smiling.

Mark Adams had lost his color. He rose like a man struck hard enough to render him nearly unconscious.

Marian came into the room.

"You haven't any right to monopolize him for so long," she said gaily.

Then she saw Mark's face. She knew he had been told. Her words were tender. "Come on outside with me, Mark."

They walked up to the boat deck.

"I didn't know," he said. "Or I wouldn't have dreamed—"

"Nobody knows." She took his arm. "I'll tell you what happened. Father married his secretary secretly long ago in South Africa. In the first month they quarreled and separated. I was born. Mother died. Father was so bitter that when he heard about me he had me put in a 'good home' and brought up—and he forgot me and I never knew who I was until I was eighteen. The people who

raised me weren't told who my father was, either."

"When I was eighteen he came to see me. I looked like my mother. I'd gone to public schools and taken a commercial course. He's a curious and devious man. He told me that he had been a friend of my father—and he offered me a job as a secretary in his office. I took it—and went to New York. I soon became his private secretary—and then, one day, he told me. He said his jealousy had made him do Mother a terrible wrong."

"He offered me the most glittering debut in social history—everything. But I was scared. I hadn't been trained for such things. And I'd grown to be pretty crazy about him. We had a swell time that day and that evening at dinner—and when I asked him if I couldn't go on being his anonymous daughter—and secretary—at least till I'd learned about his world—he was terribly happy."

The doctor drew a long, tremulous breath. "Strange," he said.

"Darling. You mustn't mind. Don't you see? When I fell in love with you, I thought—if he knew that I was Marian Stickney he'd be stiff and formal and never dare talk to me. Oh—darling"—she realized that her explanation had not

removed him from a sort of glassy calm, a studied aloofness—"it can't matter, can it?"

"I don't know, Marian. I wanted to fight for you. To work for you. I've hated the doctors I knew who married rich women in order to ease their careers."

"Rich women are still women," she said quickly. "Flesh, blood, feelings, hopes, romantic desires." Her voice rose. "Oh, I know what you think. You think I've tricked you. It's cheap of you! You should be telling me that my contribution to—us—will just make you able to get your work done sooner and better. Think of it, Mark! You wanted to be a surgeon. All right. You can have your own hospital. You had ideas for research. All right. You can have the whole Foundation. I've been dreaming of what you'd do when I told you—"

"And I was dreaming," he answered miserably, "of a two-room apartment—"

"But—please understand!"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't. It wasn't your fault. But don't you see? What you get in life without winning—only ruins you—"

Suddenly she was angry. "Ridiculous! Some kinds of idealism are stupid—and your kind is one."

She left him and he did not follow her.

Twenty minutes later Stickney came up to him. "Marian's in her room crying her eyes out. Well, Mark, I understand you. We've played you a sort of dirty trick. But I'm going to play a dirtier one."

"I don't mean to be unappreciative," Mark replied. "But don't you see? I wouldn't have a wife—I'd have a millionairess. I wouldn't have a practice—I'd have a job as a sort of super-banker and custodian of funds."

Stickney talked to him for an hour. Then he gave up. He said with abruptness, "All right, Adams. We'll leave Marian out. But remember your promise. You're going to take over for me if anything happens to me. I've already made arrangements. I've found a couple of lawyers aboard and deposited signed and sworn statements with the Captain."

He walked away through the dark.

For a long time Mark smoked. He thought with aching irony of the devastating situation. Marian's millions had literally yanked her from his arms. They had taken away the romance, the intimacy, the equality from their relationship, and left only a rich girl trying

to buy the object of her infatuation.

Mark was too proud to consider it. He could only ache with disappointment. He decided he was entitled to go back on his agreement to help in the Stickney affairs. He had been tricked into his promise.

Smoke poured into the starless sky. The dance music had stopped long ago. It was late. Below, somewhere, the night watch was hosing a deck. The Ilvania moved forward steadily, ominously.

Mark started below, and realized he would not be able to sleep. He walked around A deck. Marian was sleeping on that deck. And her father. He continued round and round.

There was no one stirring in the shadowy passageways, no one standing at the rail. Only the night and the water.

When he came around the deck forward and started astern for perhaps the tenth time, he saw another person. A passenger, half the boat length away, with his back to the rail. Even at that distance he recognized Stickney.

Mark was on the point of going below to avoid accosting Stickney. But, as his pace slowed, the man at the other end of the promenade suddenly gave a sharp, agonized cry. He buckled backward. There was

no one near him, but he acted as if he had been struck.

Mark saw as he rushed forward that Stickney lost his balance. He teetered on the rail and fell into the blackness.

Mark heard the splash. Then, with all his strength, he yelled, "Man overboard!" and charged up the companionway toward the bridge.

His appearance there started things.

A quartermaster grabbed the engine-room telegraph.

The ship dragged as the screws were reversed. Voices yelled commands through speaking tubes.

Dim figures ripped the canvas cover from a searchlight, and its white finger raced out on the obsidian water. Davits creaked. Oars clattered. Other men leaped into places in a lifeboat.

Light burst along the top deck and the decks below. Passengers began to appear. Wakened officers hurried among them. "No alarm. Man overboard. We're putting about and sending over boats."

"Who was it?"

"Stickney."

Stickney. The multi-millionaire.

Stickney went overboard. He committed suicide.

But it wasn't suicide.

Mark discovered the rope. A

rope taken from a lifeboat and made fast to a davit. A rope on which someone had slid down from the boat deck to a point just above A deck—a point over the head of Stickney as he stood with his back to the water.

The man hanging on that rope had given one quick blow and perhaps pulled the stunned Stickney backward by the collar.

That was how Mark reconstructed it for the Captain. "I couldn't see anything well. He cried out, sagged, fell back, and dropped into the water. A man hanging above him on that rope would have been screened thoroughly. Just his arm might have shown for a fraction of a second. At that distance I couldn't have seen the blow struck even if I had been looking for it."

The Captain was satisfied for the moment. A steward came for the doctor. Miss Bates had fainted.

Mark hurried to her cabin. He had a glimpse of the small boat out on the water in the radiance of the searchlight.

Marian lay on her bed, a stewardess at her side.

But as soon as the stewardess moved away and Mark bent over her, she opened her eyes. With them she signaled that he was to get the stewardess out of

the room. He sent her on an errand.

Marian spoke quickly, but in spite of the pressure of her thoughts her first words were, "Poor Dad! He was a swell person! I didn't really believe such a thing could happen."

"Are you all right?"

"I am . . . Mark, did you see anything at all, or find anything?"

"Just a rope made fast on the boat deck and dangling over the ship's side. Somebody slid down it to a place above your father's head and struck him."

Grief and pain in her eyes were subdued by the necessity of active thought. "Did Father tell you he had turned his affairs over to you?"

"He said he had."

"Then let everybody go right on thinking I'm his secretary."

Mark looked at her doubtfully. "I think you'll have to establish your identity."

She raised her head and stared at him. "I can't! Everybody on the ship knows you have been making love to me. Plenty of people know you had a long talk with Father tonight. If I reveal that I'm his daughter, and since you were the only person near him when he was killed, everyone will conclude—"

"That I did it." Mark had not thought of that. He sat

silently for a moment and then, as he heard the stewardess hurrying back, he said, "I'm sure you'll be all right now, Miss Bates."

Then he left.

A second lifeboat had been put overboard. More than half the passengers were crowded around the rail, watching the eerie search.

Mark stood for a moment, frantically thinking. This was no time to think of his refusal to marry Marian. She needed help. She might even be in the same danger that her father had been.

The Third Officer hurried through the crowd. "The Old Man wants to see you."

Captain Ross was sitting behind a desk in the reception room of his cabin. Reports were being brought to him from the bridge. Several people were in the room, including Senator Prichard and Senor Centora.

The Captain looked up gravely. "Adams, I've received a call by radio from Stickney's lawyers saying that Stickney informed them earlier this evening that you were to be put in full charge of his effects and that you had authority to act for him. Explain that."

Mark met the Captain's cold gaze steadily. "I can hardly explain it. I've known Stickney only since we left Bordeaux.

I'm engaged to his secretary. He called me into his cabin and told me that he was conferring on me powers of attorney and other authority."

"Why?"

Mark kept his composure, although he realized that the Captain, the Senator, and the South American were listening incredulously. "He said that he expected he might be killed—and he wanted someone to take over his affairs and the pursuit of his murderer."

"Was he drunk?"

Senor Centora spoke softly. "Not in the least, Captain."

"He must have been insane then, Adams."

"I think not, sir."

The Captain spread out copies of several radiograms. He said quietly, "From these messages I gather that Stickney made you virtual dictator of his estate. It is unreasonable. If he expected foul play, and felt that he needed a competent person in whose hands to put his affairs, he could have availed himself of Senator Prichard here, or Senor Centora, who is an old friend, or Dr. Moklokus, who is familiar with his great philanthropies. Instead, he selected you, a doctor with no knowledge of business, a young man whom he had known only a few days. There must be some further reason."

Mark shook his head. "I can give none."

Senator Prichard, who had been breathing heavily as he listened, said to Mark, "It's unbelievable that he appointed you to such a position!" He thrust out his jowled face. "I would like to know, Doctor, how it happens that a few hours after you receive this fabulous appointment, Stickney was murdered and you were the only one who saw him go overboard! Wouldn't it have been possible for you to have killed Stickney and then given your cry for help afterward?"

The Captain broke in. "We can make no accusations of that sort, Senator, until we are convinced that Stickney's body has been lost."

The Senator turned around. "You said yourself, Captain, that it was almost hopeless to look for the body of an unconscious man in the sea."

"I said 'almost.'" He turned to Mark. "That will be all for the moment, Dr. Adams."

It was morning. The ship was under way again and, although Captain Ross had delayed until after dawn to search for Stickney, all efforts had failed.

Dr. Adams went to his table in the saloon and breakfast. The passengers at his table were silent. Ostentatiously silent.

Mark caught them glancing covertly at him, and he realized that the incriminating circumstances surrounding him were already common gossip.

When he had finished his breakfast, the Captain again sent for him, and now he found the ship's chief officer closeted with Dr. Moklokus.

Mark observed instantly that the Captain's manner toward him had changed. At the same time he noticed that the magnified eyes of the bald doctor were regarding him with a strange attention.

The Captain said, "I'm sorry I was so rigorous this morning, Doctor. You see, Stickney's murder is a thing of world-wide consequence. His elevation of yourself in his affairs is of equal consequence. However—he glanced toward the bald man—"when Dr. Moklokus heard the Senator's opinion about the matter he hurried up here. His stateroom is not far from Stickney's. He has just told me that he was lying in bed reading when he heard Stickney cry out. He rushed to his window in time to see Stickney's legs go over the rail.

"He heard you running down the deck, saw you stop at the place where Stickney had fallen, and as soon as you shouted, 'Man overboard!' he began to dress, realizing that

you would be perfectly competent to handle the immediate situation."

This fortunate testimony filled Mark with a sense of immeasurable relief. "That is certainly lucky for me! And I'm immensely obliged to you, Dr. Moklokus."

"Think nothing of it, my boy. As a matter of fact, now that I think of it, I heard you tramping round and round the deck, and in one of your absences I heard Stickney's door open. He couldn't have been standing by that rail for more than two minutes before he was struck. Whoever let that rope down must have expected him to take a late breather. I wonder if it was a habit."

"I couldn't say," Mark answered, "but perhaps Miss Bates could."

The Captain sent for Marian, who told them that Stickney often slept very short hours and that he had taken a post by the rail of the Ilvania on previous nights.

They discussed the situation at length. Captain Ross finally said to Mark, "It is, conceivably, the work of a stowaway. We will have the ship searched. I, myself, will cross-question all the persons aboard who knew Stickney or who talked to him on this voyage. I would like Miss Bates to go through all

classes of the ship's passengers to see if she recognizes any persons who have had dealings with Stickney."

He looked at Mark. "Have you any further ideas, Dr. Adams?"

"Not at the moment, Captain. I'd like to go over the whole thing with Miss Bates."

"Certainly. As far as your authority to act in Stickney's stead is concerned I shall uphold it on shipboard. Mr. Stickney brought to me his sealed deputation of power yesterday evening. I opened those papers after my first conference with you this morning. Frankly, I can't see why Emerson Stickney chose you, but he did, and I respect his choice."

Mark shook his head perplexedly, and said, "If you'll excuse Miss Bates and myself—"

As soon as he had piloted her to a space out of earshot, he said, "It was swell of you to hold back the truth about yourself, because they suspected me of killing your father. But you don't have to do it any longer. Dr. Moklokus has cleared me." Rapidly he explained what had happened.

Marian took his arm, and then let go of it. "I don't think I want anyone to know about me yet," she said. "Look, Mark! If the world suddenly

found out that I was his daughter, I might be killed the same way, mightn't I?"

"I don't know."

"As his daughter I would be thrown into a whirlwind. As his secretary I will be safe, and I can help you."

"Help me?"

At that precise moment a boy with a radiogram in his hand spied the doctor and delivered the message.

Mark tore it open and read:

DOCTOR MARK ADAMS

STEAMSHIP ILVANIA

WILL CHECK YOUR CREDENTIALS ON ARRIVAL STOP MEAN- WHILE ARE ACCEPTING YOUR AUTHORITY STOP HAVE YOU ANY INSTRUCTIONS STOP SUG- GEST BUYING STICKNEY STOCKS WHEN MARKET OPENS AS NEWS OF MURDER WILL DOUBTLESS CAUSE DANGEROUS PRICE DROP STOP DO YOU AGREE STOP RADIO OR PHONE AT ONCE.

CYRUS BRADLEY  
GORDON VANCE  
MILTON G. DRESSER  
L. Q. BLACK

Mark recognized some of the names. Black was president of the largest bank in the country. Vance was a utilities magnate. Bradley was a famous corporation lawyer. And they were waiting for his instructions!

His expression was so shocked that Marian took the message and read it.

She smiled at him. She almost laughed. "When I said 'help you,' Mark, that's what I meant. Father wanted you to take over his affairs if anything happened to him, because he thought you were going to be my husband and you'd have to manage them someday."

He turned a haggard face toward her as she continued, "Maybe you don't want a wife, but you certainly do need a secretary. I think we ought to radio back and tell them to buy just enough to prevent any dangerous sag."

"I guess so," he said hollowly.

Marian thought for a moment. "Radio them to use the funds in the Conover National Bank. I think there's about seven millions on deposit. It may not hold the market, but we don't want to pay any more interest on brokers' loans than we have to."

Mark, still more baffled by the mention of the sum of money which he was going to authorize spending, suddenly grinned. "You'd better write the radiogram, and I'll sign it. I guess I do need—a secretary."

His grin worked a sudden miracle in him. The diseased night had passed. Emerson Stickney had died. Marian had moved unutterably beyond his possession. But she was still

with him, and would be for some time.

That brought him an abrupt and dazzling feeling of comfort. He held he did not know how much power, over he did not know what incalculable resources. His morbidly low spirits lifted.

He looked at the girl, still grinning. "Come on," he said. "The radiogram first. Then I want to talk to you."

They sent the radio message, then they went to the room that had been Stickney's.

Marian sat down, sensing the change in him. Mark walked slowly back and forth in front of her.

"Now," he began; "in the first place I haven't the faintest concept of your father's affairs. Have you?"

"I know a lot about them."

"Enough to make sense in managing them?"

"With the advice of the men he trusted—yes. Even without it—as long as we don't start anything."

"Start anything?"

"You know," the girl replied. "Buy a railroad or build a hydroelectric plant or promote a new project. As long as we just coast."

"Oh. All right. We'll coast. We'll wait until his will is probated before we do more."

"Will they probate the will without the body?"

"Certainly. It happened once while I was an intern. The body was destroyed, never found. Fire. But there was no doubt, no reasonable doubt, that the woman had been burned. So her will was probated and her estate divided."

"Then, sooner or later, I'll have to become known for what I am."

"Yes." He walked one length of the room. "We get in day after tomorrow. There'll be time enough then to consider that problem. The one thing to think about now is who killed him. Have you any ideas?"

"No definite ones."

"Meaning what?"

She shrugged. "What about clues?"

"There aren't any clues, except the rope. That's been put away for examination by experts."

"Father must have been struck with something."

"Probably thrown into the sea."

"There weren't any fingerprints or anything up on the boat deck where the rope was tied?"

He smiled. "Nothing we could see... Next point: Mok-lokus, Prichard, Centora. Do you know them well?"

"I know the doctor very

well. He visited Father a good deal. You see, Father has put millions into the institute that Dr. Moklokus presides over."

Mark nodded. "And a fine institute, too. Doing some of the best biochemical research on earth. You think the Rumanian genius is okay?"

"Except for his looks."

"A lot of doctors are funny-looking . . . How about Prichard?"

"I don't think Father cared much for him. He's from a state in which Father owns two hundred and fifty thousand acres and employs about thirty-five thousand men."

"Gosh!"

She ignored his surprise. "He's a windbag. A demagogue. He curries favor with Father because Father is powerful in his political territory."

"Right . . . Centora, then."

"I never saw him before. He is from Belgian Guiana in South America. Father discovered gold there when he was nineteen. That was the beginning of his fortune. He built and owns the railroads. He owns a steamship company that trades there. The natives have a Spanish nickname for him that's translated into 'The Blue-Eyed Papa.' Centora is a rich *politico*. He's on the side politically that's against outside ownership. But cautious. It

wouldn't do to cross Father publicly in Belgian Guiana."

"And all those three gentlemen happened to be in Europe and decided it would be useful to travel on the same boat with your father. Why?"

"Dr. Moklokus was attending a medical conference in Vienna. The Senator was on some mission in Germany. Centora was amusing himself in Paris. At least, that's what they say. But as to why they wanted to see Father . . . There are three good reasons. Father refused to renew Dr. Moklokus' contract as president of the Foundation, just before we went abroad."

Mark whistled. "Why?"

"The books weren't straight. Father called the doctor on the carpet and they had a furious argument."

"And Senator Prichard's reason?"

Marian drummed with her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I don't know much about that. Father hated crookedness. He made his money by imagination and energy. Exploitation, if you will. But never by treachery. The Senator, I just guess, was using knowledge of what the government would do, which he obtained in committees, for swelling his own purse. Father wrote him guardedly about it. I took the letter. And

the Senator, after that, was very anxious to explain."

"What would your father have done?"

"Seen to it that he resigned—ill health. Or exposed him."

"That leaves Centora."

"Mr. Centora would like—like, I say—to be the dictator of Belgian Guiana. It's a republic under nominal foreign supervision. It will be—or would be—as long as Father stood in the way."

The young doctor sat down abruptly. "Three men whose careers depended on your father, and whose careers were being threatened by your father, are on this ship. And those three gentlemen, only last night, were all discussing the best way to commit murder."

"And you suggested getting a man alone and throwing him overboard."

Mark looked at Marian.

Her eyes were steady.

He shook his head. Then he got up.

"What are you going to do?"

"Interview your father's friends."

She regarded him for a moment. "It's not a good idea."

"I think it is."

"All right."

He went toward the door. He turned. He was on the verge of saying something tender and personal.

She looked receptive. She said, "What?"

"Nothing. See you later."

He did not get to his interviews at once. His duties as ship's surgeon occupied him until bouillon was being served on the decks.

He found Senor Centora sprawled in a deck chair. The South American rose when Mark stood before him. "Ah, Doctor! I've wanted to congratulate you, since I heard you have acceded to the charge of the great Stickney's enterprises."

"Thanks. I wanted to see you."

Centora's smile was radiant. "I am honored," he said.

Mark leaned back in his deck chair. "I wanted you to acquaint me with the principal facts of the Stickney holdings in Belgian Guiana."

The South American smiled more broadly. "I shall be happy! Stickney made my country. He is our national hero. We have quarreled with him often—hated him never."

"You were quarreling with him on the voyage," Mark said, as if the fact were positive knowledge.

Centora's voice became minutely less pleasant. "A small quarrel. We wish to make slight changes in our government."

Mark took a shot in the dark. "And you proposed that Stickney cut in with you on handing over a dictatorship to you. You offered to drop out the other foreign property holders. What?"

Senor Centora politely accepted his broth from the deck steward. His smile, when the man had gone, was no longer in existence. He said icily, "May I be privileged, Dr. Adams, since you have so much power and wish foolishly to wave it in my face, to ask what your attitude from now on will be?"

Mark rose and stretched. "Can you climb ropes, Centora?" he asked.

Senator Prichard was amidships, talking to whoever would listen. He saw the doctor walking toward the group.

"Doctor!" he shouted. "I want a minute alone with you, old man."

"Fine. How about my dispensary?"

"Excellent."

The Senator sat down on a porcelain-finished chair and beamed. "I have a thousand pardons to beg of you, old man, for being so rude in the Captain's office this morning! I jumped to an idiotic conclusion when I insinuated that you might by any conceivable circumstance—"

"I might easily have done it," Mark answered calmly. "But I didn't."

The Senator lost a little of his enthusiasm for apology. "Of course not. A moment of calm reflection—"

Mark lit a cigarette. "Did you kill him?"

The eyes under florid folds of flesh, generally full of professional merriment, snapped briefly with a baleful and revealing shrewdness. "I get it, Adams. You have a right to accuse me. Tit for tat, eh? And pretty smart. If I'd done it, you'd have caught me thoroughly off my guard."

He laughed uproariously. "No, sir. Emerson was one of my most esteemed friends. And, by the way, I want to count you as a friend of mine, too. Emerson picked you to look after his estate, and, by George, I'm beginning to see what a clever fellow he picked!"

Mark said, "M-m-m-m. One clever fellow can discern another, eh?"

Again the sharp flash of the porcine eyes. Again the humorous wag of the head. "Not guilty, Adams! I'm just a bull-headed politician. Started out as a cowhand in the old days. I—"

A bell rang. Mark answered a phone.

"Tell him I'll be right down." He looked at his guest. "Sick girl in the second class. I'll be seeing you, Senator. But if you were a cowhand, you must be very clever with ropes—as well as with anticipating Federal business moves, from your inside position."

The Senator tried to hide alarm by boiling to his feet. But Mark had opened the door. "Clever with ropes," he repeated, and left the apoplectic Senator.

Mark knocked on a door in a passageway. A cultured voice said, "Come in!"

Mark walked into the room. He smiled. "Doctor Moklokus."

The celebrated biochemist waved Mark into a chair. "Considerate of you to pay me this visit."

"I was just talking with the Senator."

"Ah?"

"A friendly person. Great men," Mark continued disarmingly, "are always simple."

A faint smile moved the pale lips on Moklokus' still paler face. "Almost always. A few are complicated. I, for example. Tell me. Why did Stickney suddenly authorize you to represent him?"

"Caprice. Whim."

"I've been wondering. Perhaps he was deeply in love with

that girl. Perhaps when he found you had won her, he determined to leave her and her lover—yourself—possessed of his goods. Men in love have done stranger things."

Mark looked astounded. "I never thought of such a thing!"

"Then, too, he may have committed suicide last night. And left the evidences of an untraceable murder to keep his memory clear of the taint of self-destruction . . . I wanted," the bald man continued, "to speak of one or two things. As you know, my whole life is bound up with my work at the Foundation."

"I've always admired it."

Moklokus smiled. "Thank you. Now, Stickney refused, two months ago, to renew my contract."

Mark appeared surprised. "But why?"

The Rumanian pondered a moment. Then he said, in his low, eloquent voice, "In all men there are weaknesses. I am a strong man, Adams. Very strong. But I have had, since my days of abject poverty in Bucharest, an almost ungovernable lust for the possession of money. As president of the Foundation I handled staggering sums. And, about a year ago, acting in a trancelike manner—a hypnotic state, the product of long psychic accu-

mulation—I embezzled about fifty thousand dollars from the Foundation."

Moklokus' face was impulsive. "Stickney, of course, discovered it. I paid back the money at once. But he naturally refused to renew my contract. He had a fanatical hatred of dishonesty. I went to Vienna when he sailed this spring. I hoped to see him. I pleaded with him. He was adamant." Moklokus stopped there.

Mark looked at him for a long time. "Why are you telling this to me?"

The Rumanian spread his white, thick-fingered hands. "Because you should know. It will be you, now, who disposes of Stickney's estate—and of me, so to speak. I hoped that you, being a surgeon, might understand the values involved more completely."

His smile returned, slight now, and self-deprecatory. "Obviously, I would never again commit that crime. A treasurer could be set to guard me. But my work—is individual, and important."

Mark thought fast and hard. This was, evidently, the truth. Moklokus had intelligence enough to tell the truth—or part of it—to gain subtler ends. He rose and said, "Dr. Moklokus, if my influence is accepted, you

may be sure that I shall keep your—lapse—a secret. And I shall use every energy I possess to have your contract renewed." He held out his hand.

Moklokus took it, impulsively shook it, then turned his head away. Mark left the room.

Mark ate lunch in abstraction, automatically responding to the congratulations of the passengers at his table. He spent two hours after lunch in the ship's hospital—thinking. Once or twice he walked out and through the ship. He saw Moklokus playing chess with Centora. Later he saw the South American talking with the Senator.

He spent a considerable period with the ship's master and his officers. Captain Ross had made as complete an inquiry as he could. But all his efforts added nothing to the known facts of Stickney's death.

At four o'clock Marian telephoned Mark.

He went to see her immediately, and told her in detail what had happened.

When he had finished, her eyes were glowing. "You're brilliant, Mark. Which one do you give first place to?"

"First place? They were all angry enough at your father to have killed him."

"What are you going to do next?"

"Wait and see what they say to me—after they have had time to fix up phony answers."

"Moklokus won't say any more."

"No," Mark suddenly started. "Marian! By golly! Think of this: perhaps Moklokus was asleep when your father was killed and never did hear or see anything. But when he learned I'd been given authority to act for the estate he went up and alibied me—to win my friendship."

"Or—" Marian said breathlessly.

"Or perhaps he wanted to alibi himself. When he got me out of a hole by saying he'd seen the entire thing, he naturally made all of us assume that he was tucked in bed. He may have seen me, all right, but from that rope."

Marian nodded slowly, several times. "That's a thought to be filed for later reference . . .

Now, I've had the radiograms for you sent to me."

"What radiograms?"

She smiled. "The stock market's open. You should be standing at a ticker right now, with a phone in your hand. The Stickney holdings dropped—ten points. They then rallied a bit. The tickers carried the news that you were to represent Dad.

That knocked off another five points. I radioed Black to announce secretly, but so it would get around the Street, that you had been in training for years as Dad's bright young man, and had been in virtual management of his properties for the last eighteen months. The rumor spread. The stock rose. We bought our own stuff, and are still buying, and will be for another twenty minutes."

Mark sat down on a chair. "So I'm a sensation in Wall Street."

"You're headlines—all over America."

"Gosh! Say. What are our holdings?"

Marian brushed back her dark hair with her hand. "Do you want to know? Well, Alaska Promontory, Cape Metals, Bicolor Pictures, Trans-America Gas and Light—"

"Never mind," Mark said. "I'm sorry I asked. Will you write them down? And a note about each?"

She nodded. "I was going to—before I called. But last night or this morning somebody came in and stole the typewriter from Dad's room. It was a portable. I've sent a steward to send up another."

"Anything else stolen?"

"No. The typewriter was on the desk, in its case—a black case—ready to be taken."

"Good," Mark answered absently. "I'll never learn all those securities. Never."

"You've got to," she replied. "I'll get it ready right after dinner. And you can cram. The whole world will meet you at the boat, and you've got to be able to seem glib. You'd better go now."

She smiled at him, and her smile made him stand unwillingly at the door.

Marian understood his expression. "Rich women have feelings," she said gently. "But you imposed the conditions, Doctor."

At midnight he threw himself, half dressed, on his bunk. He unfolded the long list of Stickney properties Marian had compiled. "AIP—Alaska Promontory. Gold mines. Valued at \$2,250,000; 500,000 shares of common stock. Stickney owns 100,000. BGG—Belgian Guiana Gold. Common and Preferred—"

He realized that he was exhausted. He shut his eyes . . .

The Ilvania plowed toward America. And Mark slept. He slept while a million Americans spoke his name to a million others. Then it was heard for the first time in India and Australia and England in the hours of dawn. Around the world.

A knock on his door, soft but imperative, woke him. He sat up. "Yes?"

The white face of a steward peered in. "Doctor! Come at once."

"Somebody sick?"

"I think so, yes."

He pulled on his coat and snatched the black bag from a rack. He followed the steward.

Outside a first-class cabin stood two men—seamen—on guard. Mark saw the Captain coming down the passageway.

He stepped back.

Captain Ross jerked his head and went into the cabin first. Mark followed.

There was no one in the room. No one alive. The lights were all on. In his bed lay Senator Prichard. There was a revolver in his partly clenched hand. A .45.

A bullet had made a hole in his forehead and shattered the back of his skull. The pillow was drenched with blood.

Captain Ross shut the door of the cabin and said, "Shot was heard and reported by a passenger about ten minutes ago."

Mark bent over and stared at the butt of the revolver. He saw the initials *M.J.P.* engraved there.

"Killed himself," Mark murmured.

The Captain's face was grave

and perplexed. "I don't understand it."

Mark's eyes had fastened themselves on the writing desk. He walked over to it. On it was a portable typewriter. He noted almost automatically that the case top lying beside it was blue—it couldn't be the one that had been stolen from Marian.

There was a sheet of paper in the machine. Several lines had been written on the paper. They were unevenly and rather clumsily typed.

What Mark read aloud was a message from Prichard: "It's no use. I killed Stickney. My reasons for doing it are private and will never be known."

"He was drunk when he wrote that," the Captain said. Mark nodded. "He probably had something pretty serious on his mind. Prichard wasn't the sort of fellow who would take his own life without plenty of cause."

"No," Ross answered absent-  
ly.

"There is nothing we can do here, anyway—"

Together they left the room. The ship's master instructed the men on guard to remain at their posts, and walked on deck with the doctor. Sometime later Mark bade the Captain good night and went to his quarters. He undressed slowly.

Stickney had been killed by Prichard. That was that.

He stretched out in his bunk with his eyes closed. The heavy night and the incubus which swam in it made his sleep uneasy. And he sat up tensely when there was another sharp knock on his door.

"Come in!"

It was a member of the crew to tell him that the Captain wanted him.

Daylight was streaming into his room. He glanced at his clock. Half-past eight. A few minutes later he presented himself at the Captain's cabin.

Ross nodded, and unrolled a pair of trousers on the desk top. "These were in Prichard's closet."

Mark picked them up. Except for the fact that they were crumpled from having been rolled, he noticed nothing unusual about them. They were a reddish-brown, heavy tweed. He remembered having seen Prichard in the suit.

"Take a good look at the outside of the right leg."

Mark repeated his examination, and then saw several small spots. "Blood?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," the Captain answered. "These trousers were hanging in Prichard's closet. I went back to have another look at his things myself. I noticed those spots.

He didn't dress for dinner on the night Stickney was killed, and he was wearing that suit. Now, if he had slid down the rope and hit Stickney, a few flecks of blood might have spotted his trousers. But there is a more significant item. Sticking to the insides of the trouser legs I found a couple of short hemp fibers."

Mark shook his head. "I'll take a look at those stains under the microscope. It'll be easy enough to tell whether they are human blood or not."

Half an hour later, Mark returned from the ship's hospital and made his report. "It was blood all right. That's a terrible thing to think of—Prichard sliding down that rope, slugging Stickney, and pushing him into the sea."

Ross looked searchingly at the doctor. "It is. Well—thanks, Doctor."

Mark returned to his quarters, bathed, shaved, and breakfasted. Then he went out on deck. The passengers were obviously depressed. Few people were sitting in the sunlight. Marian, however, was in her deck chair. He sat down beside her.

"Do you think," she said, "that Prichard killed my father?"

He nodded.

"I don't."

He turned quickly toward her. "We found bloodstains on the trouser leg of the suit he was wearing that night. And two or three hemp fibers—from the rope."

The girl was staring out to sea and talking in a low tone. "I could see Moklokus murdering somebody. Or Centora. He has ambition. But not Prichard, somehow. He was crooked. He was vain, and he wouldn't have liked the exposure of his little racket. But he's not a murderer."

Mark smiled. "A woman's intuition? You're upset."

"I'm not. And even if he were a murderer, he simply wouldn't commit suicide. He liked life too much."

"But the facts . . ."

"What facts?" Marian gazed steadily at Mark. "He was found dead with his own gun in his hand. All right. Somebody could have stolen his gun, shot him, and put the gun in his hand. It would take quite a while after the shot for anybody to get there. In fact, it did take quite a while. I asked. In that time a murderer could have easily gotten away."

Mark looked at the girl apprehensively. "But, Marian, that's not all—"

"Of course it's not all. But it would have been a cinch to steal those trousers and put

blood and pieces of hemp on them. And that note was written on a typewriter. It wasn't in Prichard's handwriting. Anybody could have done that, too. Senor Centora spent the whole evening in Prichard's cabin. They were both drinking. Centora could have written that note by just pretending he was fooling with the typewriter—then shot Prichard—or typed the note right after the murder."

"Wouldn't it be easier, Marian, just to assume that what very evidently took place, *took* place? Wouldn't it be easier not to make up such elaborate explanations?"

She caught his arm. "Do you *really* believe Prichard committed suicide?"

"No."

She relaxed. "I didn't think you did."

"I don't believe it," Mark said slowly. "And I have a hunch Captain Ross doesn't believe it, either. But what can we do?"

"Nothing now, but I think that when Senor Centora gets off the boat tomorrow we ought to have detectives shadow him. I can arrange it by code right now."

Mark started to his feet. "That's a good idea. And what about taking the same precaution with Dr. Moklokus?"

"You were speaking of me?" Mark turned his head and smiled blandly. Dr. Moklokus had emerged from a companionway in time to overhear the mention of his name. "Why, yes, Doctor, I was just telling Miss Bates about some of your work in histology."

The bald Rumanian nodded politely and moved down the deck. Mark turned to look back at him. Moklokus had also turned. The friendly expression which he had worn as he emerged from the companionway had vanished.

Five times during the afternoon Mark talked on the radiophone with New York, prompted by Marian. The men with whom he talked were men whose names he had seen in newspaper headlines. Mark gave the intricate operations which he conducted a calculated aspect of certainty and confidence.

He had to rely on his own invention often. Gordon Vance wanted to know if Stickney's philanthropies could count on their regular annual appropriations. Mark said they could. Vance also said that Moklokus' contract had come up for renewal. Mark ordered it renewed.

Black gave a statement of their market position. Mark

requested that unless there was a further sag in the Stickney holdings, stocks be allowed to seek their own levels. Black called again to say that several large accounts were being quietly withdrawn from his bank. Mark put his hand across the telephone and reported that to Marian.

She said quickly, "We've got to do something to restore confidence there."

Mark, reducing the situation to simple elements because he could understand it no other way, whispered quickly, "Why don't we tell Black to buy another bank? Or to announce that he is negotiating to buy one?"

"Good! Suggest it," Marian said.

Mark did so.

Black's dignified voice took on a quality of excitement. "I'd thought of that, Dr. Adams, but I was afraid to offer it. May I say that in my opinion Emerson appointed a brilliant successor?"

Mark replied, "Thank you, Mr. Black," hung up, and grinned at Marian. "I make a first-rate tycoon."

Evening.

There was no festive dinner. No Captain's Ball. Conversations everywhere were subdued.

After dinner Marian and

Mark sat together, until she said, "I'm going to try to get some rest. You'd better, too, because tomorrow you will find out what it means to be a national figure. And I suggest that you study your lessons in Stickney stocks."

Reluctantly he bade her good night.

He was very weary. He went to his cabin and pored over the stock lists. After two hours he went to bed.

The Ilvania steamed westward. Montauk Light had been sighted. In the hours after midnight the engines cut their speed and the ship moved into the harbor. She dropped anchor off quarantine. A police boat came alongside. But the murderer of Stickney had killed himself, and the work of the police would be only routine.

Just before daybreak the quarantine ship came out, loaded with reporters.

They woke Dr. Adams. They bribed a stewardess to waken Miss Bates. And, as the sun rose over the city, first Adams, then the girl, and later other passengers were interviewed and cross-questioned and photographed.

Mark had one brief moment of comparative privacy with Marian. They were standing on the boat deck. His face was taut and alert. "You stick with me

everywhere I go today. Remember, you're my secretary."

She nodded, and smiled a little. "I remember offering myself for the position. You never really accepted me."

Mark grinned. "It's a fine position."

At lunch, downtown, with President Black of the Conover National Bank, with Vance, the utilities man, and Bradley, the corporation lawyer, Mark looked at Marian. His head spun. All the morning he had been with these celebrated men. He had been talking in millions and tens of millions. Of the situation in Washington. And of the provisions in Stickney's will. He was putting on a good act, but this was not his way of life:

In the afternoon he occupied Stickney's private office on the sixty-eighth floor of a skyscraper. He sat behind Stickney's desk. Marian was at his side. Men with great names came and went. On Mark's desk was a newspaper. Its front page carried his photograph, with the caption, *Czar of Stickney Fortune*.

Between his tightly packed and awesome appointments, Marian had time to say only such little things as, "You're doing fine!" and he to reply, "It's like playing God—"

Dinner with three men who had hurried up from Washington. Afterward he went to a suite which Marian had engaged for him at a hotel. At ten o'clock he was closeted with a railroad president who had flown from Chicago. At eleven he had time once again to talk with the reporters.

He found himself mouthing phrases that he had read as the words of other industrialists: "America cannot falter, because, if she wishes, she can be abundantly self-sufficient"; "Science and invention are the parents of wealth and employment—not its enemies."

Then it was one o'clock, and he found himself sitting in the reception room of his suite, looking with a sort of exhausted triumph at Marian.

"I guess," she said, "that's all for today."

"Except that I promised to write a couple of letters. If you've got the strength left, could you write them tonight?"

She nodded, and then hesitated. She picked up the telephone and asked for the desk. She turned to him before she spoke. "I've got to get a typewriter sent up. I forgot that mine was stolen."

She made her request and hung up. When she faced Mark again, she jumped to her feet. "What's the matter?"

Mark was pale. "You mean your typewriter disappeared just before your father died?"

"I guess so."

"It had been in its case on the desk that evening?"

"Certainly. Somebody stole it either before or after father was killed."

Mark's eyes were shining. "That's it! That means Prichard was murdered!"

Marian was frightened. "Mark! For heaven's sake—!"

"It must have been Centora! He was with Prichard that night, getting him drunk—"

"If you would just take it easy, Mark, and explain—"

"No time! What was the name of the detective agency that we cabled to watch Centora?"

Marian told him.

A moment later he was on the telephone. A man who spoke with painstaking slowness said, "Mr. Centora registered at the Colonnade Hotel, had dinner there, went to bed, and left a call for nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Then he got up, dressed, came down the stairway, and sneaked out of the lobby. He took a cab to the Stickney Foundation."

"When was that?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

Mark looked at Marian. "We're going to visit Dr.

Moklokus at once. Come on!"

The Stickney Foundation was an enormous red-brick building on the edge of the Hudson River. Here and there lights burned on its impressive facade.

A doorman stopped them. Mark produced his card. "Dr. Stevenson sent for me. A friend of mine."

"Seventh floor. Laboratory K."

They took an elevator.

They got off at seven and walked through gloomy corridors. "What floor is Moklokus on?" he whispered.

"Third."

"We'll go down the stairs."

The door to the great scientist's private suite and laboratories was locked. They tiptoed into the room next to it and tried a connecting door. It was locked. Then the fire escape.

It gave them access to a window in the adjacent laboratory. The window was locked. Mark went back and returned presently with a long, thin-bladed knife. He found Marian waiting tensely on the fire escape. He turned the window lock with the knife.

They stepped gingerly into Moklokus' workrooms. Rooms crowded with intricately blown glass. Walking there in the

near-blackness was dangerous.

They found another door beyond, opening into a short, pantrylike chamber filled with shelves of paraphernalia. And a second door at the end of that closet. Mark put his ear to it.

He heard voices, and recognized them.

Centora was talking softly, wickedly to Moklokus. "My dear Doctor, you were a close friend of Emerson Stickney's. Your opinion will have immense weight. I want you simply to suggest that his holdings in Belgian Guiana be liquidated. I, myself, propose to take over the conduct of affairs there. And I am quite sure that you will do everything in your power to assist me."

Moklokus' response was faintly strained. "My dear Centora, *why* are you so certain that I'll help you plunder Stickney's estate?"

"I am very certain. You see, Dr. Moklokus, I happened to observe you in the act of filching Senator Prichard's trousers from his room while he was at dinner. From that I conclude that you murdered the worthy politician."

Moklokus spoke slowly. "And what other conclusions have you reached about me, Centora?"

"Merely that you were in a most uncomfortable predica-

ment, which led you to do away with Stickney. And then, since your predicament was still somewhat uncomfortable, you thought that the suicide of a self-confessed murderer would be the most effective method of concealing"—he paused delicately—"whatever the little matter was you wished to conceal."

There was a pause. The Rumanian scientist replied almost lightly. "That's really very perceptive of you, Centora. You reason that I would feel the investigation certain to follow Stickney's murder might become embarrassing to me. That I would do away with Prichard, thereby removing suspicion from myself. However, since you knew that I had committed one murder—since you assumed I had committed two—I am rather surprised at your temerity in coming here to blackmail me tonight, Centora. In fact—"

Marian and Mark had not caught any noticeable change in Moklokus' tone. It was soft and polite. However, his speech was punctuated with a muffled explosion.

There was a moment of absolute silence.

Then the crumpling thud of a body.

After that a longer silence, broken by a new voice.

It was the voice of Emerson Stickney saying, "Drop that gun, Moklokus."

Mark, listening at the door, felt Marian shudder and sag as she heard her father speak. He put his arm around her.

On the other side of the door was an unimaginable scene. Moklokus had just shot Centora, and, suddenly, Stickney had appeared from the dead.

There was a long, soundless pause.

Then Moklokus broke it with words that trembled slightly. "Ah, Stickney! You've heard our conversation? I thought that when I shot Centora just now I had executed your murderer. But since you weren't murdered, I am rather at a loss—"

Stickney's voice was peaceful. "Centora thought you had killed me. You thought Centora had killed me. I'm surprised that you went to such pains to cover up a murder of which you were not guilty. It was adroit—but dangerous."

Moklokus answered, "Not so dangerous. If Centora had not spied me—" He sighed. "It is regrettable that I didn't get you, Emerson. The trunk. The refrigerator gas. But when I heard you were gone, I thought—"

"You thought Centora had

done me in. Now, if you'll just come out from behind your desk—"

There was a sound of moving feet, and then the Rumanian spoke again, his voice suddenly vibrant. "Stickney, you will see that I am going to pick up my gun! Before you can get across the room to me! Isn't that light I see shining through the chambers of your revolver?"

"Don't move!" Stickney shouted. "One chamber is loaded."

Moklokus sighed. "Quite so. Your pistol is not loaded. Unfortunately for you, mine is, and now that I have picked it up and you have not shot me, I can complete the undertaking on which I have embarked. I have facilities here for disposing of any amount of biological waste. Your body as well as Centora's."

Stickney had tried to bluff him with an empty revolver and failed.

Moklokus was talking again. "Before I kill you, Emerson, I wish you would explain your appearance. Perhaps, when Centora hit you, you only feigned unconsciousness, and caught yourself on the rail of the deck below?"

"No," Stickney answered in an even tone. "If you're really interested in why I'm not dead—that is to say, why I am

not yet dead—I'd be delighted to tell you."

"Please do."

Stickney began talking slowly, with remarkable calm. He talked to gain time in which to think. Talked to save his life, if it were possible.

"My maneuvers would appeal to you, Moklokus. I knew young Adams was making circuits of A deck. I went to the boat deck by the inside stairs. I wore gloves. I tied the rope. Then, between rounds of the young man, I took my post at the rail of A deck.

"When Adams appeared, I pretended to have been struck. I groaned. I toppled backwards, and then slid down the rope. One deck. I might have been seen. There might have been someone on the deck below. As a matter of fact, there was."

Mark and Marian, on the other side of the door, listened with frantic concentration. Moklokus was going to kill Marian's father—but he was in no hurry. And the financier was talking coolly, while part of his mind was unquestionably struggling for a way to escape being murdered.

Moklokus was aware of the fact. "Talk as much as you like, Stickney. Think as much as you like. I believe there is no way out of your present dilemma. But I am curious about one or

two facts and I'd be grateful if you'd answer them before I kill you. You were saying that there was someone on the deck below?"

"It was Captain Ross."

"Ah!"

"The Captain has been my friend for a great many years. Earlier in the evening I explained to him that I was going to stage a fake murder."

"Why?"

"Because somebody was trying to kill me. You, for instance. I thought that if I were already dead it would frustrate my enemy. I assumed that by his actions after I had gone, I could identify him. Then I had another motive."

"Which was—?"

"Young Dr. Adams. I had become interested in him. I was anxious to see if he would be competent to handle my affairs. It was imperative that I should know his full abilities and his basic character."

In the dark, behind the door, Mark knew what he would have to do. Stickney was coming to the end of the story. Moklokus would soon shoot. There was an even chance that the Rumanian's back would be to the door behind which Mark and Marian listened.

Mark would have to take that chance. He would have to open the door slowly and

noiselessly—creep across the room—attack Moklokus.

Of course, Stickney—if it were Stickney who faced the door—would see the whole thing, and Stickney's eyes might betray the attempt. In that case, Moklokus would start shooting, and Mark and Marian's father would have only a slim chance. If it were Moklokus who faced the door, there would be no chance for either of them.

Mark seized the knob in tense fingers and began to turn it. Marian gripped his arm for an instant to indicate that she understood.

He opened the door a little.

Stickney's voice went on. "Yes, Dr. Moklokus, I wanted to test that young man. So I thought that while I was 'dead' I would let him be the dictator of my enterprises. And I am proud to say that Dr. Adams has done a magnificent job."

Mark had opened the door. He was able to look into the room. Moklokus, back toward him, was sitting at a desk twenty feet away.

Mark slid into the room. For a fraction of a second his eyes met Stickney's, and Mark's heart hammered with admiration: Stickney did not move a muscle of his face. He merely went on with his story as Mark inched toward Moklokus.

Stickney, in fact, arranged that story so that its most dramatic disclosure would surprise the Rumanian at the instant when Mark was ready to spring. "Of course, Captain Ross assisted me. It was in his own cabin that I hid. I heard your testimony to the Captain that established Dr. Adams' innocence. What was that, Moklokus? An effort to cast suspicion away from yourself? Or an attempt to ingratiate yourself with Dr. Adams when you found he had so much power?"

Moklokus answered lightly, "A little of both."

Mark had covered more than half the distance.

Stickney was nodding almost amiably. "You're a resourceful person. At the very outset of this business you almost got me. Twice. When I went, you thought Centora had done it. But as long as people would be probing my affairs in search of a murderer, your precious reputation was in jeopardy.

"So you provided a murderer—a dead one who couldn't defend himself. Not Centora. You were positive that he'd keep mum, and he was too slick to kill easily, anyway. Prichard . . . But I imagine you were quite surprised when I walked in here this evening."

"Surprised—and delighted."

"Naturally. It gives you the opportunity to settle everything, once and for all. But I will take the liberty of suggesting that from now on you beware of Dr. Adams. He is extremely competent. After my death—or even right now, for that matter—he will be dangerous."

Mark edged forward.

"You can doubtless give the proper psychological term to your particular brand of insanity," Stickney continued. "Megalomania—something like that. And this is your moment, isn't it? Too bad the gun Ross lent me is empty."

"And just one other thing, since I see you're getting impatient. I had an additional motive in pretending to have been murdered. Young Mark Adams was engaged to Miss Bates and—circumstances—had spoiled that engagement. I thought my 'death' would act as a powerful force to bring them back together. You see, Moklokus, my interest in Adams is not entirely detached. He is going to be my son-in-law."

"Son-in-law!" Moklokus was startled.

"Precisely. Miss Bates, my secretary, is actually my daughter."

"Daughter!"

"I'll explain that to you. I—"

Mark had covered the distance. He dove for the hand in which Moklokus held the gun. His chest crashed on the desk. He caught the wrist. The gun went off—but Stickney had dropped to the floor.

Moklokus was up and fighting. He had three times Mark's strength. But Mark hung on with desperation.

Then Stickney hit Moklokus behind the ear. He fell.

Marian was in her father's arms, crying.

Mark picked up the doctor's gun. He rubbed his shoulder and looked at the gun. When Moklokus tried to rise to his feet, Mark pointed it at him.

Nobody said anything. It wasn't necessary. Then Mark phoned for the police.

Marian was still weeping. But suddenly she went over to Mark and threw her arms around him. He kissed her. He patted her awkwardly, with the hand not holding the gun.

Stickney, keeping his eye on Moklokus, said in his easy voice, "You know, Mark, I've put you to something of a test. I didn't want a bust for a son-in-law. And about this wealth of mine. I had a friend who wanted desperately to fight in the last war. He could have had a commission. But he was one of the best publicity men alive. He knew that his

propaganda work would be worth fifty men in the trenches. So he went into that work. You're geared for surgery and research, but also for a great deal more. If you can sacrifice a certain personal pride—which I think was like that other man's—

Mark's eyes fell on the high-backed chair behind Moklokus' desk.

He knew that someday he would sit in that chair.

But the main thing was not that. The main thing was Marian, trembling in his arms.

"I still don't see how you knew enough to come here tonight. I—" Marian looked puzzled.

Mark grinned. "It was that stolen typewriter. I suddenly realized that the splash I heard had been made not by a body going overboard but by a typewriter! The splash would sound the same, and the typewriter would sink instantly. Of course, it was your father

who 'stole' the typewriter.

"That meant your father was still alive—it made the whole rope trick plain as day. It meant Prichard had been murdered, as we suspected. He couldn't have 'confessed' to a crime that hadn't been committed.

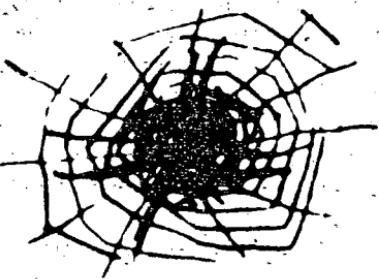
"So I wanted to get immediately to Centora. When we heard he was here, I believed that he and Moklokus had worked together. I was sure neither of them knew your father was alive—otherwise, of course, Prichard wouldn't have been killed. So I wanted to hear what Centora and Moklokus had to say to each other."

"So did I," Stickney said. "I almost heard too much."

Outside, police sirens screeched in the distance. Moklokus shivered.

Mark took Marian's arm and led her toward the door. "It was all so obvious," he said.

She smiled—because it had not been obvious at all. But it was very satisfactory.



# Kelley Roos

## Murder Underground (The Case of the Hanging Gardens)

*The locale of this short novel, complete in this volume, is a labyrinth of caves in western Pennsylvania—Ryan's Caverns, a scenic wonderland and, in its grotesque way, Nature's fairyland.*

*Dark, dark things happened in the darkness inside the earth. In the Devil's Parlor? In Hell's Grotto? In the newly opened tourist attraction called the Hanging Gardens? Dark, dark things—and the darkest of them was murder, four hundred and fifty feet below the surface of the earth...*

### Detective: CHIEF OF POLICE HANEY

Elsa Logan looked up from her typing a moment to rest her eyes. She glanced across her cheerful little office in the Powell mansion, then walked across to the window and looked down the mountain at the river winding through the small town in the valley. It was a tastefully blended sun-bathed picture, western Pennsylvania at its best. It made her glad that she was Robert T. Powell's secretary.

People were wrong, Elsa thought, when they warned her a year ago against taking the job with Mr. Powell. The town people said he had turned

vinegary, and was straitlaced to the point of austerity, a tyrannical bachelor. Once that might have been true, but not lately. In fact, not since the fifty-two-year-old Mr. Powell decided to marry Miss Lola Kramer.

The prospect of marrying Lola in about a month would be enough to cheer up any man. Elsa had gone to high school with her. Lola had been quite a girl, even then. People used to say she should be in the movies. Everyone said she was wasting her time here in Mottsville, Pa., population 6,947. They couldn't understand why Lola,

when her family moved to Pittsburgh, had stayed on, working as a salesgirl in the Dress Box.

Then, suddenly, they did understand. Lola landed Robert T. Powell, which surprised the entire town. Why, it was plain as day she was marrying him for his money, everybody said. They could be right about that, Elsa thought. Lola was marrying him, and he did have money.

Robert Powell's father had built his fortune on coal and timber. Robert had grown up here, an only, lonely child on this thousand-acre estate on top of the mountain. Then a motor accident orphaned his three much younger cousins, and Phoebe, Vivian, and Nick Powell came to live in this great stone fortress of a house.

Now, twenty years later, they were Robert's only relatives. People in town called them the Powell heirs and wondered maliciously how they felt about Lola stepping in between them and the Powell fortune.

Elsa didn't know about Vivian and Phoebe, but she did know about their younger brother. Nick cared only about finishing law school, then winning his own fame and fortune. Recently Elsa had been seeing a great deal of Nick, and

she couldn't think of any nicer way to spend her time. She wasn't sure yet how Nick felt about her, but she was hoping. Now that Lola Kramer was out of circulation and Nick had stopped leading the town wolf pack in the chase, Elsa had finally managed to catch Nick's eye. He had, she thought, seemed pleasantly surprised.

A rough, croaking voice cut through Elsa's daydream. "Hello, girl."

"Why, hello, Walt."

Walt Carr ambled through the doorway and came to Elsa's desk. He was a trim little fellow of indeterminate years; he gave the impression of being a retired jockey. He winked at Elsa and cocked his head to one side.

"Got a new joke," he said. "Can I try it out on you?"

"Could I stop you?"

"No."

This was a ritual between Elsa and the little guide from the nearby Ryan Caverns. He had stepped off the highway one day to ask Woody Ryan for a day's work. Woody and his wife, the former Phoebe Powell, had taken an immediate liking to him. Now, three years later, he was the cavern's star guide. Walt prided himself on his spiel; he loved to make his subterranean sightseeing audiences laugh.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Walt croaked, "you are about to enter the Devil's Parlor, four hundred and fifty feet underground. Sorry the Devil ain't in. He don't use the parlor much—can't stand the altitude."

Walt didn't see Elsa's smile; he always closed his eyes when he roared with laughter. He throttled his self-appreciative mirth as the door across the small office opened.

Robert Powell, a smile softening the sharpness of his pale face, waved a salute to the visitor. He said, "I heard that, Walt. Pretty good."

"Thanks . . . Say, here's your mail. Met the postman down at the gate and saved him a trip up the lane."

"I'll take it, Elsa," Mr. Powell said. "Thank you, Walt."

"Sure," Walt said. "Mr. Powell, Woody sent me over to ask a favor. He gave his secretary a couple of days off, and now he finds he's got to get this publicity piece typed up and out to the papers tonight, or it won't make the Sunday editions. He thought maybe Elsa—"

"Of course," Elsa said. "How many copies?"

"Five will be fine."

She glanced at the scrawled yellow sheets that Walt handed

her. "Oh, it's about the new section of caves that Woody's opening," she said.

"The Hanging Gardens," Walt said proudly. "I named it."

"Is it all ready?"

"Woody finished lighting it today. And it's really something—to delight and amaze!"

"I'm dying to see it," Elsa said. "I've heard Woody rave about that cave for at least ten years, but he'd never let me see it. Too dangerous to get into, he said."

"Well," Walt said, "you can walk right into it now. That was a tricky blasting job, enlarging the entrance . . . Why don't you do yourself a favor and come down and see it, Mr. Powell?"

Elsa saw Robert Powell's face tighten, and she shot Walt a quick look of warning. She was sure Walt must have heard of the accident six years ago, before the caves were opened to the public, an accident that almost cost Mr. Powell his life. He had stumbled one day onto a hidden entrance and ventured into the darkness, exploring it alone. On his way back a small avalanche blocked his passage, trapping him beneath the earth. It was a dreadful six hours before he was located by his cries for help, another horrifying twelve hours before they could dig him out.

When Woody, heading the rescue party, finally brought him up, he was half crazed with pain and shock. It took months in hospitals for him to recover, and he still hadn't overcome his fear of the caves. His injured left leg had turned the proud sportsman into an armchair athlete, and was a constant reminder of his frightful experience.

Walt, ignoring her warning glance, blustered blithely on. "I know you had a bad time down there once, Mr. Powell, but things are different now. Nothing to be afraid of any more. If you'd just pull yourself together and—well, I bet you'd like it. I can imagine what you went through, but—"

"You can, Walt, can you?" Robert Powell's face flushed at the subtle taunt in Walt's voice. "Have you ever gone through anything like that?"

"Well, no," Walt said uncomfortably. "But I—"

"Then you couldn't possibly imagine what I went through."

He was quiet a moment, then began to speak softly, as if by compulsion, as if he had to justify his fear to Walt, to prove to Elsa that it was not cowardice. He told them how he had tried to quell the panic that rose in him, to think clearly. He had crawled slowly, carefully, in what he hoped was

the right direction, his hands stretched out before him, groping. The second time his fingers had found the same peculiar, fan-shaped stone, he knew he had been moving in a circle.

The space he had fallen into was large and he was hopelessly lost. It was only after interminable hours of clawing his way round and round in the hideous blackness that he found the passage through which he had come. Then, at the moment when he saw a glimmer of fading daylight, the rock slide had imprisoned him.

There was death in Robert Powell's low voice and, as Elsa listened, the caverns no longer seemed the place of beauty and wonder she had always found them. They had become menacing, waiting—having waited millions of years—to trap the newcomer to earth, man. One mistake, one foolish risk by a mortal, and he was punished for his invasion from above.

There was a long silence when he finished speaking; then he said, "Do you still think I'm a pantywaist, Walt?"

"No, wait," Walt said. "I didn't mean that. I—Look, Mr. Powell. I don't blame you for staying out of that hole in the ground. I would, too."

The happy smile that had become his habit in the past

few months was back again on Robert Powell's face. "Phoebe says I turn pale at the sight of a cellar door." He turned toward his office. "Well, I'll look at this mail."

"Say, Mr. Powell," Walt said, "I never did congratulate you on getting married next month. I wish you and Lola all the best."

"Thank you, Walt!" The smile threatened now to dislodge his ears. "Thank you!"

The office door closed behind him.

"Walt," Elsa said, "I have some letters to do for Mr. Powell, then I'll get at Woody's publicity."

"Want me to wait?"

"No, I'll take it to Woody on my way home."

"I'd appreciate that, Elsa. I got things to do. So long."

"So long, Walt."

It took about fifteen minutes for Elsa to type Mr. Powell's dictated letters. She started for the inner office to get his signature, opened the door, and stopped, looking at Robert Powell in astonishment.

He was standing rigidly behind his desk. One hand was replacing the telephone, the other was a tight, white fist pounding an agonized rhythm on the green blotter. His face was contorted in a grimace of angry misery.

Involuntarily, Elsa spoke his name. Without looking at her, he whispered harshly, "No. Not now, Elsa. Go home."

She quietly closed the door and stood uncertainly in her office. It was obvious he wanted no help from her. She thought of finding Nick, then realized he wasn't home. He would still be at the country club where he was working as golf pro.

She wondered if his sister Vivian were in, then rejected the idea of alerting anyone about Mr. Powell. He wouldn't welcome any offer of help or advice. More likely he would be furious with her meddling.

After a few minutes she managed to compose herself and get to work on Woody's typing chore. She was jumpy, and it took nearly an hour to finish. She gathered together the papers, got her purse from the desk drawer, and went to the inner office door.

She knocked hesitantly. There was no answer. Either Robert Powell had left his office by the other door or he was ignoring her knock. She turned away and went out of the big house into the lovely July evening.

She climbed into her elderly, tired sedan, coasted down the long graveled lane to the highway, and drove half a mile

to the newly painted sign, large and bright, that pointed the way to the fabulous Ryan Caverns, western Pennsylvania's scenic wonder. It announced that on next Monday the caves would reopen to the public with the unveiling of the Hanging Gardens, a breath-taking new addition to the thrilling subterranean tour. Growing competition from a cavern across the mountain had inspired Woody Ryan to make this addition.

The approach to the caves was a climbing, half-mile private road. It cut across a finger of the great Powell estate and snaked through the now fallow Ryan farm, past the ramshackle farmhouse where Woody Ryan brought the lovely Phoebe Powell as a bride ten years ago, past the glittering structure of stone and glass that he built for her when his caves became a success. The road glided across the crest of the mountain and rolled down to the huge log lodge that housed the entrance to the caves. Woody's black convertible was the only car in the two-acre parking lot when Elsa pulled into it.

The lodge was empty. She walked through the groups of leather chairs and sofas, past the souvenir counter beside the gigantic fieldstone fireplace, through the ticket turnstile. She

slipped into one of the heavy jackets provided for the unprepared visitor's comfort in the fifty-two-degree year-round coolness of the caverns. One of the large elevators was locked, the other was on the lower level. She used the iron staircase that wound over 250 feet down into the earth.

She set out to locate Woody Ryan, starting along one of the paved walks that narrowed and widened between the glistening jumbled walls of limestone. In the glow of the electric lights the colors ranged the spectrum of the rainbow. Ryan Caverns were really a scenic wonder; they were breathtaking, they were all the adjectives in all the ads, and Elsa never tired of wandering through them.

She passed through the great fiery-colored gallery known as Hell's Grotto, and took a passage to her left. Now she could hear the hum of water and in a minute she reached the underground waterfall, and its hum became a roar. Through the shimmering spray she could see a tall familiar figure beyond the falls moving away from her.

She called out, "Nick! Nick, wait!"

He didn't stop or turn, and she called again as he disappeared into one of the passages ahead of her. Quickly she skirted the churning pool into

which the water cascaded and started to hurry after him. Then she stopped, realizing that she could have been wrong, that it probably hadn't been Nick.

Nick had never shared her enthusiasm for Woody's caves. He'd seen them; they were okay, they were fine, he said, but he'd seen them. Woody had hired a number of workmen to prepare the new chamber for its opening; it was probably one of them she had seen.

She moved on down the passageway, then took a branch tunnel to the right which brought her out at the Chamber of Gold on the main guide route. She stopped and hesitantly called, "Woody?"

As the sound bounced off the high cavern walls, she walked rapidly up a side tunnel toward the Dunce's Cap. Then she heard the clank of metal on metal and headed toward the sound. She rounded a bend and found Woody working—no, *playing* was the word—with a lighting effect at the Twin Witches.

Woody looked up as she approached, and a big friendly grin widened on his face. He would soon be forty, almost twice her age, yet somehow she had always felt that he was one of the gang.

"Hi," he said. "Look, I've almost got it. Wait a second."

He fiddled with a small spotlight. "How's your mother and dad?"

"Fine. They're always asking about you."

"Haven't seen them for a month—hardly been in town at all. Tell them I've been so darned busy here at the caves—there! That does it!"

He switched out all the lights in the passageway except the spot. Its beam struck the overhang of rock that was shaped like two witches' faces in profile. Now, if you used just a little imagination, there was another witch.

"Woody! How wonderful!"

"The Three Witches. You know. Shakespeare."

"Macbeth, wasn't it? Congratulations."

"Thanks. Kind of like it myself." He saw the sheaf of papers in her hand. "Those mine, Elsa? Remind me to do something nice for you someday."

"How about right now?"

"Name it."

"Let me look at the new room."

"The Hanging Gardens? It's not quite ready yet. Why don't you wait for the grand opening?"

"Walt said it was— Oh, please, Woody!"

"There are still a few things I want to do in there"

"All right! Forget I asked you. I'm going to sneak in."

She went down the long passage, past the Dunce's Cap, back into the Chamber of Gold. There she turned left, went through a smaller cavern named the Little Temple, and then on to the Hanging Gardens. She stood in its newly blasted entrance, staring at the room in delight.

The chamber was about as long as a freight car, three times as high, four times as wide. Its four walls were golden cascades of flowstone, its ceiling an arch of countless tiny stalactites, building at the approximate pace of a cubic inch a century. Few men would ever live long enough to discern any difference in them.

The colors of the room were predominantly gold and bronze, but there were splashes of ivory, soft old rose, shining icy blue. It was a fairyland.

Then she saw the feature of the room, the Sailfish, and moved to the center of the chamber to stand before it. From the floor there bulged a rounded rectangle of rock and on it nature had painted a huge fish in silver-blue. From its back she had miraculously sculpted its sail fin, perfectly fluted and silver-touched. It took no imagination at all to see it as a sailfish.

She stepped closer to it, reached out her hand to touch its smooth coldness, and she saw the still, twisted legs that protruded from behind the rock. She forced herself to move around the rock, forced her eyes to move from the sprawled legs up to the blood-streaked, lifeless face.

Robert Powell had been brutally, savagely beaten to death. She screamed as she ran from the chamber . . .

Elsa closed the door of Woody's office, leaving Chief of Police Haney alone. It had been a harrowing half hour, answering his seemingly endless questions.

She walked slowly down the corridor. When she reached the place where she could see into the main room of the lodge, she stopped, not wanting to go on, dreading to face the five persons whom murder had brought together.

There was Nick, his buoyant attractiveness blurred by the tenseness, the haggardness of him. There were Nick's two sisters—Phoebe, looking more ravaged because hers was a softer, warmer beauty. Vivian's features were sharp; the tragedy had wrought less change in her habitually brooding, restive face. There was Woody, whose shock and incredulity had given

way now to sorrow. Then, sitting apart from the family group, staring at them in helpless commiseration, was Walt Carr.

Elsa heard a footstep behind her. Wes Gelb, a young town policeman, leaned against the wall beside her. In a low voice he said, "You know you're looking at the murderer, Elsa."

"Oh, Wes, no!"

"Sure; it's one of them—Nick or Vivian Powell, Phoebe or Woody Ryan. They get the Powell money now, don't they?"

"And you think one of them would have killed to get it? Oh, Wes!"

"All right. If Lola Kramer had married old Powell she would have got the money, wouldn't she?"

"Wes, I don't want to talk about it."

"She would have got most of it, you can bet on that! You know Lola. Why else would she marry him? A man more than twice her age. And he gets murdered a month before the wedding, before Lola can get her hands on all that dough. But now, with him dead, the cousins are the only heirs."

Elsa turned her back on him, took a step away, but Wes moved beside her again.

"No alibis, not one. Any one of them could have killed him.

Vivian says she was out walking—alone. Phoebe was at home, she says, but there's no one to prove it."

"I know, Wes," Elsa said wearily.

"We found the weapon—a two-foot length of pipe. Any of them could have used it. This was a real cool customer. Not a fingerprint, the thing all wiped clean except for some blood. Sorry, Elsa. But this is murder and—"

She walked away from the policeman. She'd always known Wes Gelb as a pleasant young man whose main concern was traffic regulations, and Chief of Police Haney as the jovial guardian of a quiet, friendly village. A murder changed them, Elsa thought, just as it changed the rest of those in this room.

Chief Haney had been grim, relentless in his questioning of her. He made her realize her importance, her responsibility. She had been the last person known to see Robert Powell alive; and it was she who had discovered his bludgeoned body.

All the questions seemed pointed to one answer: Why had Robert Powell gone down into the caves? What made him overcome his psychopathic fear of the caves which years before had almost taken his life?

Elsa had told Haney how happy, even gay, Mr. Powell had been all morning, all afternoon until the phone call. Even telling Walt Carr and her of his dreadful accident hadn't spoiled his good humor for long. He had even joked about it later. But after the phone call— She described how she found him at his desk, stricken, anguished, just putting down the telephone.

Haney had asked, "You've no idea who he was talking to?"

"None at all."

"You're his secretary, Elsa. Wouldn't you have answered?— Oh, I see. He must have made the call."

"Yes. There's no switchboard, only an extension."

"He called someone," Haney said, "who told him something that upset him, that made him go into the caves. He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"No, I didn't even see him leave. He must have gone out the French doors in his office to the garage. I suppose he did drive—"

"Yes, we found his car in the parking lot behind the lodge."

"That's why I didn't see it when I got here."

"Elsa, who could he have possibly called?"

"I don't know. Usually he asked me to get a number for him, but this time—"

"All right." Then Haney had left her alone in the office. When he came back he said, "Both Woody and Phoebe say he didn't phone them. It might have been Lola Kramer. I've sent for her."

Then more questions about Elsa's arrival at the caves, her talk with Woody Ryan, her discovery of the body in the Hanging Gardens.

"You didn't see anyone else down there, Elsa? Only Woody Ryan?"

"Yes, I—there was another person, a man. He was by the falls when I saw him, before I found Woody."

"Recognize him?"

"I—I only caught a glimpse of him through the falls. It might have been one of the workmen." She rubbed her hands across her eyes. "Mr. Haney, I don't know any more. I've told you everything I can."

He had dismissed her from the office and asked her to wait with the others in the lodge.

Now Wes Gelb's callousness seemed more than she could bear. She didn't join the group at the far end of the lodge. Instead, she sank quietly into a chair by the cold fireplace. She closed her eyes, pressing her hands against the throbbing in her temples. She was grateful that no one, not even Nick, came to her.

She heard a car pull to a stop before the lodge. Then a policeman was holding open the door, and Lola Kramer walked past him into the room. He motioned her toward the office, but Lola ignored him. She stood looking at the group across the room, at Phoebe and Woody, at Nick and Vivian.

Elsa felt a tremor of revulsion at the sight of the pretty, voluptuous young woman. Lola's full, bright-red lips were pressed in the pout of a greedy, spoiled child suddenly deprived of what it wanted most. She wasn't mourning the death of Robert Powell; she was resenting it.

Woody and Nick rose from their chairs, but it was Phoebe who spoke. "Lola, we've been thinking about you."

"Yes?" There was a challenge in her husky voice. "Not one of you thought enough about me to come and tell me what had happened."

Vivian said sharply, "We had to stay here, Lola. The police—"

Lola interrupted her. "But you've been thinking about me. Thinking what?"

"Lola," Phoebe said, "please don't— It's been dreadful for all of us."

Lola said, "I know what you've been thinking! And it hasn't been dreadful for you."

"Now, Lola," Woody said.

"You, too, Woody," Lola said viciously. "You hated my engagement to Bob just as much as those three! And why? You're a local boy who made good, aren't you? You married one of the fancy Powells."

"There you are!" The shrillness of Vivian's voice silenced Lola. She was speaking to Nick, but she made very sure that Lola heard. "There's your 'good kid at heart,' Nick. There's the wife who would make a human being out of Bob! Don't you see now how cheap she is, how heartless and—?"

Lola's lip curled in a scornful smile. "Is that why you didn't want me to marry Bob, Vivian? Because I'm cheap and heartless? I don't remember you thinking that when I ran around with Nick. I was good enough for your brother. But when it was Bob and me—then, suddenly, I'm cheap and heartless! Why, Vivian? It couldn't be because if I married Bob I'd be moving in on money you considered yours, could it?"

"How dare you talk about money," Vivian said chokingly, "at a time like this, you—"

"You don't care anything about money, Vivian?" The sarcasm almost foamed from Lola's mouth. "You've been living the life you have—a

housekeeper for Bob—because you're so fond of him? You don't mind getting what amounted to a salary—no, an allowance—from him? Stop it, Vivian! You've only been staying with him in that big ugly house on top of that lonely mountain because some day there'd be money for you. If you were a real good girl, there'd be lots of money."

"Lola!" Phoebe's voice rose angrily in defense of her sister. "You don't know Vivian; you don't know any of us well enough to talk like this!"

"No? No, Phoebe? I know more than you think. Bob didn't have any secrets from me. So don't try to be so high and mighty. Don't pretend that money didn't mean anything to you. I know different. I know how much you want to get your hands on some of it, and right away! You Powell girls, you wonderful, wonderful Powell girls! Think you're above anything so low-down dirty as money, but I know better."

"Lola," Nick said urgently, "please."

"Okay, Nick, I'll shut up." But the echo of her bitter tirade still rang in the silence of the big room. She looked slowly around the circle of shocked, hostile faces and for a moment there was fright in her eyes.

Then her chin lifted defiantly. "I'll shut up. Just don't any of you overdo the grief act. I know how you felt—all of you except Nick. You'd rather have Bob dead than married to me—or anyone."

Walt Carr moved over toward Lola, stepped between her and the others. He said, "Lola, baby, Mr. Haney wants to see you. That's why you're here. Remember?"

"What does he want me for?"

"I'll tell you," Haney said. He walked by Elsa from out of the corridor. She had no idea how long he'd been standing there, listening. "Lola," he said, "did Mr. Powell telephone you this afternoon?"

"No. I talked to him before lunch, that's all."

"You're still working at the Dress Box?"

"Yes, tomorrow was to be my last day." Her face darkened; there was that childish anger in it again. "I guess I won't be quitting now."

She half turned back to the Powells, and Haney spoke quickly, "Were you at the Dress Box all afternoon? Could he have called and you not know about it? He made a call around four o'clock."

"He might have; I don't know. I knocked off early, a little before four."

"What did you do?"

"I took a ride. In my new car."

She hurled the last words at the Powells, as if serving notice that this was one thing they couldn't take away from her—the sleek convertible that her fiancé had given her. The town gossips had been chattering for days about it.

Haney said, "Were you alone?"

"Yes. Say, what are you doing to me? Seeing if I have an alibi? Me?"

"Alibis," Haney said gently, "are very nice things for everybody to have at a time like this. All right, folks, that's it for now. Stay close to home, all of you."

Twenty minutes later Elsa finally got a chance to be alone with Nick. Except for two police squad cars, theirs were the only two left in the vast parking lot. Nick closed the door of her car and stood beside it, looking through the window.

"I wish I could take you home, Elsa, but Vivian—I can't leave her alone in that big house. She's expecting me to follow her."

"That's all right, Nick—" She stopped, uncertain of what to say.

"What is it, Elsa?"

She said hesitantly, "Nick, I thought—Were you in the caves today? Before—before it happened, I mean."

"Why, Elsa?"

"I thought I saw you by the falls when I was looking for Woody. I called, but you didn't answer."

"I didn't hear you, Elsa. Probably the roar of the falls—"

"Then it was you, Nick? You were down there?"

He nodded. "Yes. For a little while."

"But, Nick, why? You hardly ever go down in the caves. Why today, of all days?"

He smiled ruefully. "Woody'd been talking so much about the new room I thought I'd take a look at it. I just happened to pick today to go there, that's all."

"But, Nick, the new room—That's where he was. Didn't you see him there?"

"I didn't even get to the new room, Elsa. I got lost and wandered around for a while, then gave up and went home. I didn't see Bob, or anybody, except one of the electricians who was working down there."

"Did the electrician see you?"

"Yes. Why, Elsa?"

"Won't he tell Mr. Haney you were there, Nick? Shouldn't you tell him before—"

"But I have told Haney—I told him right away." He looked down at her in surprise. "Elsa, is that what's troubling you? You didn't tell Haney you saw me because you were afraid I might have— Look, stop worrying. I didn't see Bob, and I had no idea he was down there."

"I believe you, Nick. And I didn't tell because I wasn't positive it was you. I didn't want to involve you."

"Elsa." He reached through the window, pulled her close to him, and held her briefly. "I'm not involved. But thanks for worrying about me. Feel better now?"

"Yes, Nick. You'd better go after Vivian."

"All right, Elsa. Good night."

She drove away as Nick climbed into his car. She dreaded going home. Her mother and father would be waiting for her, waiting with sympathy and understanding, but with a hundred inevitable questions.

She drove slowly down the mountain and into the town, reminding herself constantly that Nick was in no more trouble than his two sisters. All three of them had conceivable motives, if you thought about it. She parked in front of her house, then walked across the

freshly sprinkled lawn to the trim little white house.

The next morning, after some hesitation, and against the will of her mother, she set out for the Powell mansion. It was possible she could help; there would be phone calls, telegrams, other details that she could handle for Vivian and Nick. She backed her car out of the drive and was on her way.

The town was quiet. There was a subdued air about the people as they talked somberly to one another on the streets. Mottsville would miss Robert Powell. There had been a time, long ago, when the townspeople resented the invasion of the Powells, when old Mr. Powell had bought up hundreds of acres of their mountain land for his family playground.

But over the years the Powells had endeared themselves to the villagers. It was Phoebe's marriage to a favorite native son, Woody Ryan, that made Mottsville completely accept the whole family as one of them. Since this event they spoke of the Powells with possessive pride, pointed out the great mountain house as a local landmark.

Elsa could remember Robert Powell before his accident, the times she had seen him play and, seemingly, always win the golf and tennis tourneys at the

Country Club. He had been a vivid, if somewhat arrogant, figure until his harrowing accident in the Ryan Caverns. After that, his robust health ruined, he had lived a quiet, retiring life.

He converted a part of the great mansion into an office and, until Lola burst into his life, had devoted himself entirely to the management of the family fortune. Old Mr. Powell, his father, had stripped the countryside of its coal and timber, but the Powell fortune still remained, and under Robert's direction grew even larger.

Elsa sped past one of the big gaudy signs extolling the wonders of Woody's caves. How ironic, she thought, that the place where Powell had once so narrowly escaped death and where, finally, he had met it, should prove to be the caverns whose success he had made possible. Without his help, Woody could never have turned them into the rich commercial venture that they were.

The building of the new Dixie Highway five years ago had brought a flood of tourists through this part of the country. It had been that fact which made Woody realize the commercial possibilities of the caves on his farm. But the fulfillment of his dream would

have been impossible without Robert's help.

A generation ago, when Robert's father bought up the mountainous land, Woody's father had refused to part with his homestead. A feud of sorts developed, but it was known that old Mr. Powell had had a grudging respect for old Mr. Ryan's love of his land, now surrounded by the great Powell estate.

In order to open the caves to the public, Woody had to build a road from the new highway across a corner of the Powell land. In spite of his own feelings about the caves, Robert Powell had cooperated in every way to help Phoebe's husband achieve this financial success. And now, hating and fearing the caves as he did, something had made him go down into them one more time—to be murdered there.

As Elsa parked in the estate's wide garage, she noticed Nick's car was gone. She walked around to the front of the house. An old gardener, poking aimlessly at a flowerbed, shook his head sadly at Elsa, saying nothing, needing to say nothing. Elsa knew how he felt; he had first worked for Robert Powell's father.

Phoebe's bright-red coupé stood before the veranda steps and, behind it, a police car.

Elsa was crossing the foyer toward her office in the business wing when she heard her name called. She turned, saw Chief of Police Haney beckoning to her from the living room. She found Phoebe there, and Vivian.

Phoebe had withstood the ordeal of the past sixteen hours more successfully than her sister. She looked tired, spent, but she was composed. Vivian's thin face was lined and haggard, her hands trembled; all resemblance to her more beautiful, glamorous sister had been obliterated, and Elsa was shocked by the sight of her.

Haney said, "Elsa, I wanted to ask you about the mail delivery here, the afternoon mail. What time does it come?"

"Why, usually between three and four."

"And yesterday it came at that time?"

"Yes, Walt brought it in yesterday. He'd met the postman on the road. He gave it directly to Mr. Powell."

"I see. And he took it into his office to read?"

"Yes."

"And the next time you saw him he seemed upset?"

"Yes, he was just hanging up the phone and—"

"The phone, yes. We've been able to track down that call he made. It was to Lola Kramer."

"Then she lied, didn't she?" Vivian said vindictively. "It was something that Lola said to him that upset him so, that sent him down to the caves."

"No, she didn't lie," Haney said. "Lola didn't get the call; she'd already left the store. One of the girls at the dress shop answered the phone . . . Mrs. Ryan," he said, turning to Phoebe, "I want to talk to both of you about Lola Kramer."

"Lola Kramer is a town girl, Mr. Haney," Phoebe said. "I'm sure you know quite as much about her as Vivian and I."

"You know more about her relationship with your cousin than I do. How long had they known each other?"

"Several months. They met last winter."

"How did they meet?"

"How? Why, through Nick, I suppose. Isn't that right, Vivian?"

"Yes," Vivian said shortly. "Yes, Nick introduced them."

"And your cousin became interested in Lola right away?"

"Probably. But none of us realized it for some time." Vivian's pale lips tightened. "Suddenly it seemed Bob was giving me a present from the Dress Box almost every other day. It took me a while to realize that the inspiration for his generosity was one of the salesgirls there. For weeks he

acted like a college boy smitten by a chorus girl. It seems the whole town was talking before he finally screwed up enough courage to tell his own family he was going to marry Lola Kramer."

"How did Nick take it?"

"He was shocked at first, of course. We all were."

"Wasn't he more than shocked? Angry, maybe? After all, Nick and Lola—"

"No!" Phoebe said. "Lola never meant anything to Nick! They had fun together, that's all. You know that chasing Lola Kramer is almost a town game for the boys." Phoebe smiled faintly. "And Nick had a strong sense of competition. But when he saw that Bob was serious about Lola, he gave her up completely."

"Somebody," Haney said, "doesn't agree with you, Mrs. Ryan. Somebody thinks that Nick and Lola were still pretty much interested in each other."

"Who?" Phoebe demanded.

"A letter writer," Haney said. "A letter writer with a poison pen. We have one or two of those snakes in town."

He drew a crumpled piece of white paper from his pocket and gingerly, holding it at the very edges, flattened it out on the desk. "We found this on the floor of Mr. Powell's car . . . No, don't touch it. We'll have

it tested for fingerprints. But, you see, it wasn't the phone call that knocked Mr. Powell for a loop. It was this letter."

Elsa moved to the desk and her eyes widened in angry disbelief as she read the typewritten words:

"Dear Mr. Powell:

"Are you so old and feeble-minded you believe that Lola Kramer would marry you for anything but your money? Haven't you realized that she and Nick Powell are as crazy about each other as they ever were? If you don't believe me, you might go to the Ryan Caverns this afternoon around five o'clock—where your dear cousin and your fine fiancée are in the habit of meeting."

Elsa said chokingly, "Mr. Haney, you don't—you don't believe that—you can't! It's a lie, a dreadful lie!"

"Of course it's a lie!" Phoebe had come to stand close beside Elsa; her arm was comforting around her shoulders. "A nasty anonymous letter! No one in his right mind would believe it!"

"I don't know," Haney said slowly. "Perhaps I'll know better after I've talked to Nick, and to Lola. But at the moment I know someone was sure enough that Lola and Nick were meeting in the caves to write this letter. And Bob Powell at

least believed it enough to phone Lola, to try to check on her. And when he found she wasn't at the store, he went to the caves."

"No," Phoebe said. "You know how Bob hated those caves. Nothing as ridiculous as that vile letter could have driven him there."

"You mean he wouldn't have believed the letter? He wasn't jealous of Lola?"

"Yes, he was jealous," Phoebe said reluctantly. "I have to admit that. Bob was a terribly possessive person. But he trusted Nick. He never would have believed this of Nick."

Haney turned to Vivian. "What do you say about that, Miss Powell?"

"I—I agree with Phoebe, of course."

The policeman regarded her for a moment, then sighed. "It's natural for you to want to protect your brother, but—"

"Protect him!" Phoebe cried. "But we're telling you the truth!"

"You may think you are, Mrs. Ryan. Perhaps you don't know the truth. But your sister does, and she isn't telling it. Miss Powell, one of your servants overheard a quarrel between Bob Powell and Nick. You were present. The quarrel was about Lola. The servant

only knows that much. Will you tell me more? Or shall I use my imagination?"

Vivian looked to her sister for help. "Phoebe—"

"The truth," Phoebe said. "Tell it—whatever it is."

"Yes, they—they did quarrel, Bob and Nick. Lola was spending a good deal of time at the Country Club, swimming mostly. She and Nick were together a lot. I imagine Lola still found Nick more exhilarating than Bob, though not so financially stimulating. Anyway, Bob heard about it, and he was furious. He didn't believe that Nick's interest in Lola was just friendly; he tried to make Nick promise to stay away from her. Nick got angry; he refused to be dictated to. There was quite a battle."

"And then," Haney said, "on top of that, this note came. I think perhaps it was just enough to send Bob Powell down into the caves. If he found Nick there with Lola, if there was a quarrel, another battle—Nick's young and hot-tempered and strong. He might have—"

"No!" Phoebe said. "No, it's all a lie! Bob didn't find them together; they weren't there!"

"Nick was there," Haney said. "He's admitted that. I don't know about Lola Kramer—not yet."

He started for the door, hesitated, then turned back to Phoebe. "Mrs. Ryan, I might as well get this over with now."

"Yes?"

"Last night Lola Kramer made a remark to you that puzzled me. She implied that you were anxious to get hold of some money—very anxious."

"Yes," Phoebe said. "I didn't think you'd miss that."

"What did she mean, Mrs. Ryan? Woody may not be really wealthy yet, but those caves of his are on the way to making him just that. Why do you need money?"

"She doesn't," Vivian said. "Certainly you don't believe every word that Lola—"

"Don't, Vivian," Phoebe said. "I think Mr. Haney already knows the answer. Don't you, Mr. Haney?"

"I'm afraid I do, Mrs. Ryan. I talked to Lola last night. Bob Powell told her about you and Woody. She knew that you wanted to leave him."

"Phoebe!" Elsa said. "No, that isn't true! Why, you and Woody—"

"Yes," Phoebe said quietly, "it is true. I've wanted to leave Woody for a long time now."

"But your cousin didn't approve, did he?" Haney said. "You wanted him to stake you, finance you, if you divorced Woody. He refused, didn't he?"

"Yes. He refused to help me."

Haney nodded. "I can imagine how Bob Powell would have felt about any scandal. And I know how much he always thought of Woody. Did he go so far, Mrs. Ryan, as to threaten to disinherit you if you left Woody?"

"Lola told you that, too, didn't she? Yes, she's right. He did go that far. He begged me to stay with Woody and I—I said I'd think it over. And I did think it over—"

"But now," Haney said flatly, "you're free to leave him, you can afford it now. The murder arranged that for you. The money's yours without asking."

Vivian stepped forward and said angrily, "You've accused Nick of murder—and now Phoebe."

"I'm not enjoying it, Miss Powell," Haney said sharply. "Tell Nick I want to see him." Abruptly he turned and left the room.

Elsa heard the front door slam. She looked at Phoebe, at the lovely, gracious woman she had always thought so happy, so content, and she said, "Phoebe, it isn't true, it can't be! You and Woody have always been—"

"I know, Elsa. You're like all the rest. Phoebe and Woody,

the marriage made in heaven. Well, it hasn't been exactly that. I'm not sure what went wrong with us. Maybe those first years when we had so little, when we struggled and scrimped and saved, when Woody wanted so frantically to be as rich and important as Bob—maybe those years were too much for both of us. Anyway, there was nothing good left in our marriage. There hasn't been for a long time. I tried to show Bob that."

"Phoebe, I'm sorry."

She smiled bitterly. "Bob was sorry, too—about my unhappiness. But everybody, including Mr. Haney, knows how he felt about Woody, how fond and proud of him he was. He thought I was out of my mind to want to leave him. He wouldn't help me. And because I'm like Vivian I've stayed with Woody. Money means as much to me as it does to her."

"Phoebe, how can you!"

There was acid in Vivian's tone. "You sound like Lola Kramer, you—"

Phoebe smiled ruefully at her sister. "Not quite, I hope, dear. But Lola's right about both of us. We can't bear to face a life without money, without luxuries."

"You did once, Phoebe—when you married Woody. But me—yes, I guess you're right

about me. If only I'd had the courage to leave this house, if only I hadn't let Bob run my life for me!"

"Don't be too hard on Bob. He didn't realize—"

"Yes, he did. But he was so afraid of being left alone here that he discouraged every young man who was ever interested in me. He drove them all away. And then to take up with that girl—Lola, Lola Kramer of all people! He dared disapprove of my beaux and then wanted to marry a thing like her."

"It's over now, Vivian," Phoebe said.

"No. Mr. Haney's wondering now which of us killed Bob. All three of us are being suspected of murder. And Nick—what will this do to Nick?"

"He'll be all right," Phoebe said. She was looking at Elsa. "You mustn't believe those things about Nick and Lola, Elsa."

"I don't!" Elsa said fiercely. "I know they're not true."

Vivian covered her face with her hands. "Where is Nick? I've got to see him. I've got to talk to him before Haney does!"

"He didn't tell you where he was going?" Phoebe asked.

"No, he just went out for a drive. He didn't sleep at all last night and—"

Elsa said, "He might have

gone up to Lookout Rock—he often does."

"Yes!" Vivian said eagerly. "I'll drive up there and find him."

"No, Vivian." Phoebe's hands were on her sister's shoulders. "You're going to lie down—you need some rest. Elsa will go, won't you?"

"Yes," Elsa said. "Right away."

Phoebe was leading Vivian up the broad staircase to her room when Elsa left the house. She drove down to the highway and turned off at the road to the caverns, a short cut to Lookout Rock—if her old car could climb the last rough, steep mile of dirt road. The car's noisy motor pounded out a rhythm as it chugged along. Nick and Lola—Nick and Lola—Nick and . . .

No, she thought, trying to thrust it from her mind, no, Phoebe's right; it isn't true. It's a mistake, a lie. Nick will explain it. He'll be able to explain it all.

Then she saw his car parked in the paved turnaround in front of the Ryan house. She jerked her car into the drive, swerved to a stop. She ran across the flagstoned terrace, pounded the brass knocker until the maid opened the door for her.

The maid shook her head. "There's no one at home now,

Miss Logan. Mrs. Ryan went over to her sister's, and Mr. Ryan's out, too."

"But isn't Nick here? His car's out there."

"Yes, he was here a little while ago. I think he went to look for Mr. Ryan."

"Is Mr. Ryan over at the caves?"

"I don't know, ma'am. He might be, seems like he always is."

She left her car at the Ryan house and raced across the lawn to the caverns. The big lodge was empty, and she looked hastily into Woody's office, then in the smaller room where his secretary worked. One of the elevators was up, the other down. Slowly she dropped down into the caverns.

There was no one in sight when she stepped out of the elevator, but the lights were burning in each of the three wings that stretched out from the portal where she stood. She called out for Woody, for Nick. She heard no answer, but the acoustical tricks the caverns played made it possible that someone might be within fifty feet of her and still not hear her call.

She started down the central passage that led to the new Hanging Gardens. She was in the deepest part of the caverns, approaching the long slender

finger of gently moving water that Woody called the Lake of the Moon. He had contrived lighting effects that produced spectacular reflections of the overhanging rock formations in the shallow water—the Sunken City, the Pirate's Shipwreck, the Ocean Volcano. She hurried past it, not stopping this time to admire it, and came to the entrance of the Chamber of Gold.

This, actually, was a widening of the passage into a chamber, partitioned by walls of rocks into a maze, a catacomb. There were jagged openings, windows, portholes, arches in the walls. In many places the glistening flowstone gave the impression of golden altars. Now the chamber divided itself into two passageways, and she took the one to the left.

She went past the stalagmite that she called the Dunce's Cap and started down the aisle. She found herself hurrying, anxious to find someone, to be with someone. It was so still, so very lonely down here inside the earth. She had never felt that way about the caves before, but now, after last night, she walked faster, almost running.

She had gone a good 75 yards toward the Three Witches when she heard the sound of footsteps ahead of her—per-

haps, she thought, around the next twist of the passage. She moved ahead quickly and in a moment had rounded the turn. The passage before her was empty.

"Woody!" she called. "Woody—Nick!"

There was no answer. She took a breath to call out again, and it exploded in a gasp. The lights in the caves suddenly blackened out and the passage plunged into total, incredible darkness.

She stood a moment, trying to calm herself, knowing that the lights would come back on immediately. Groping her way to a wall, she put her hand on its comfortless, damp coldness, and waited. She called out, and the echo of her voice bounced back at her so quickly that it frightened her.

She called again, but there was still no answer but the echo of her own voice. She stood very still, listening. There was nothing in the caves but the ghostly, primeval silence.

Involuntarily, though she knew she should remain where she was until the lights came on, she turned and started blindly back toward the entrance to the Chamber of Gold. She kept one hand on the wall, the other stretched out before her, moving cautiously, but still she stumbled and fell. She got

to her feet and went on, even more slowly now, anxiously waiting for her hand to touch the Dunce's Cap and tell her where she was.

She called out again for Woody, for Nick, but her voice was the only sound in the blackness.

A cold fear began to rise inside her. She should have reached the Dunce's Cap by now; she should be almost back to the Chamber of Gold. With both hands she reached out about her, touching each outcropping of rock, hoping its identity would establish her position. There was nothing familiar to her, no rock, or stone, or jutting wall, and the thought lurking in her mind grew until she must accept it as more than a possibility.

Somehow she had stumbled into a section of the caves that were not open to the public, a place not yet wired for lighting, not yet explored. Perhaps she had blundered into a tributary that not even Woody Ryan knew about.

Her foot missed a step and she plunged headlong to the floor. She heard a clatter as her things spilled from her shoulder bag, and she groped wildly about, finding a comb, a pen, a lipstick, and stuffed them back into her purse.

She knew then that panic

had taken hold of her. She forced herself to stop scrabbling in the blackness; she fought to regain her control. She had lost touch with the wall; first, she knew, she must make contact again with a wall. She moved along on her hands and knees, finding nothing but space.

She got to her feet and moved forward again, both hands outstretched, feet shuffling to make sure her next step would not send her hurtling down into nothingness. Her knee bumped against a stone. She stooped and felt a jutting blade of rock, caressed it with her hands. It was delicate, distinctive—a fan of stone, a lady's fan, opened for use.

With a little cry she jerked back from it. She knew now where she was. The fan-shaped formation must be the same one that Robert Powell had come upon; the chamber was the one he had discovered—and his flight from it had almost caused his death.

She knew now that the fear she had been fighting was justified; she had blundered into an unexplored section of the caverns. No one could ever find her in this chamber; no one but Robert Powell had ever been in it before. The passage he had used was blocked now, its entrance sealed. She had only one chance, she knew—to

find her way back, miraculously, as she had come.

She forced the fear from her mind, made herself inch forward into the awful emptiness. But slowly the fear seeped back into her. Her slow walk became a running stumble; she was sobbing; and she knew that she had again lost control.

She staggered on, and when she touched stone wall she made no attempt to be logical, to even consider which direction to take. She only knew she had moved from one chamber into another; now she was in a passageway.

Her hand touched a smooth, rounded rock as she passed it. She stopped and turned back again to it, clasped it feverishly with both hands. Her fingers felt the droll outline of the Dunce's Cap, and her relief exploded in a cry. She knew now where she was. The impossible had happened.

Somehow she had found her way back into the developed part of the caves, into the Chamber of Gold. Now she could find her way, even in the blackness, back to the cavern's portal and up to the lodge above it.

She was still sobbing hysterically as she ran across the lawn to the Ryan house. She saw Nick step from behind his car and stop short at the sight of

her. Then he was running toward her; his arms were tight around her.

"Elsa, what is it? What's happened?"

She couldn't speak; she sagged against Nick. He picked her up, and in a minute she was lying on a sofa in the Ryans' living room. Woody was at her side with a jigger of brandy.

After a few moments she sat up. She said, "I'm all right now."

"Have a little more brandy," Woody said.

"No, I'm all right now."

Nick said, "What happened, Elsa?"

"I went down into the caves, looking for you and Woody, and I—I got lost."

"Lost?" Woody looked at her in worried surprise. "You, Elsa? How?"

"The lights went out and I—I got panicky. I know I should have stayed where I was, but I was so sure I could find my way back to the portal."

"Wait a minute," Woody said. "The lights went out? Why?"

"I don't know. I thought I heard someone, and I called out, but no one answered. Then, right away, the lights went off. Maybe someone turned them off, or maybe a fuse blew. I didn't stop to think about it then, I—"

Nick spoke, interrupting her. "What about the lights down there, Woody? Is it possible that a fuse could just blow?"

"It's possible, but I doubt it. The wiring, the whole system's just been overhauled for the reopening." Woody strode to the picture window across the room, stood looking through it toward his caves. "Someone must have turned those lights out. But why anyone should have done it, or who could have done it—"

"Who's down there now, Woody?"

"That's just it. No one's supposed to be. The police sent the workmen home when they came this morning."

"Walt?"

Woody shook his head. "I don't think so. I sent him into the village this morning to do some errands for me." He turned abruptly and started for the doorway. "I'll take a look in the caves." They heard his footsteps cross the terrace.

Nick said, "I'd better go with him, Elsa."

"No, Nick, wait! There's something else—that's why I was trying to find you. They—Nick, the police found a letter. It was written to Mr. Powell. They know now why he went down into the caves."

His voice was very quiet. "Tell me about it, Elsa."

She turned her face away from him. "He thought that you and Lola were in love with each other, that you were meeting in the caves. That's what the letter said."

Nick said nothing, and at last she made herself turn to him. He was looking at her with a blank, white face.

"Nick," she said, "I know it isn't true! I know you didn't go down there to meet Lola."

"But I did, Elsa. When you saw me yesterday, that's what I was doing—looking for Lola."

"Nick—"

"But that's the only part that is true, Elsa. The rest of it is a lie. Elsa, listen to me: the steward took a message for me at the Club yesterday. Someone said she was Woody's secretary, that she was calling from the caves."

"But Woody's secretary isn't working now. He gave her a few days off!"

"Yes, I know," Nick said grimly. "I didn't know it then. This person said Lola was at the caves, and she wanted to see me there at once, that it was urgent. I thought it was crazy, and I hadn't any idea why Lola would want to see me, but I went. I didn't find Lola, and I didn't see Bob, either. I never did go into the new room, Elsa, and that's the truth."

"I believe you, Nick."

"Right after I got home, the police phoned. I saw what the setup was then: Bob murdered in the caves, Lola and I both down there. It would have been fairly obvious what had happened—Bob found us together, he and I quarreled, I killed him. That's the way it was planned; only something went wrong. Lola wasn't in the caves."

"You're sure, Nick?"

"I didn't get to talk to her until this morning. She didn't get a message to meet me, but that was probably because she'd left work early. She couldn't be reached. I'm sure she was supposed to get the same message I did. We were both to have been in the caves at the time of the murder."

"But, Nick, if Lola can prove she wasn't there, then they'll know it couldn't have happened that way. They'll know you were tricked."

"She can't prove it. She went for a ride, alone; she was gone for a couple of hours." Defeat crept into his voice. "It looks as if the plan is working out, after all, doesn't it? They know I was in the caves, and we can't prove that Lola wasn't. They'll probably find out that Bob and I had a fight a few days ago—over Lola."

"They know about it already. One of the maids overheard you."

He said, "Bob was wrong, Elsa. There wasn't anything serious between Lola and me; there never has been. But I doubt if I can convince the police. I wasn't able to even convince Bob. He believed strongly enough to go down into the caves."

"Nick," Elsa said slowly, "the person who wrote that letter, who phoned you—that's the murderer. Mr. Haney will see that."

"He will if he believes that the letter is a lie—if he believes that I was tricked into going down into the caves, and that Lola wasn't there at all. If not—No, don't worry, Elsa. I'll go to him right away; I'll tell him the truth. There isn't anything else I can do now."

"Nick, Vivian's terribly upset. She wants to see you before you talk to Mr. Haney. She sent me to get you."

"She knows about the letter?"

"Yes, Mr. Haney showed it to us—Vivian and Phoebe and me. They don't believe it, Nick, any more than I did. But Vivian's so worried she's almost sick."

"All right. I'll see her first." "I'll follow you back."

"You?" A little smile chased the somberness from his face. "Come here a minute."

He took her hand, led her

across the room to a mirrored panel of wall. She stared at the reflection of a grimy, muddy girl with tangled hair and dirt-streaked face. Her stockings were shredded, her dress torn and clay-smudged. She turned away with a gasp of dismay.

Nick said, "Use Phoebe's bath, borrow some of her clothes. She won't mind."

She went down the hall past Woody's suite of rooms into Phoebe's exquisitely feminine ones. She took a quick, steaming shower and slipped into a robe that hung on the bathroom door. She was crossing Phoebe's bedroom to the solid wall of closets when Phoebe rushed into the room.

"I saw Nick outside," she said. "He told me what happened. Elsa, are you all right?"

"Yes, of course."

Phoebe ran her hand distractedly through her hair. "What's happening now in those caves? Is something else horrible going on?"

"But nothing happened, Phoebe. The lights went out, that's all, and I—"

"Those lights didn't just go out," Phoebe said tensely. "You don't really believe that, do you? Someone turned them out. And there was a reason for it, there must have been."

"Phoebe, it might have been

an accident. I just got lost."

"Yes, Nick told me." Her hand reached out to grasp Elsa's wrist, tightened on it. "And you managed to find your way out. Elsa, do you realize how lucky you were? Do you know how dangerous those caves are in the dark? There are a hundred places where you might have fallen, hurt yourself. You might have been killed."

"But, Phoebe, I'm all right." Phoebe's intensity was suddenly frightening. Her arm hurt where Phoebe's hand clutched it. "I did get out—"

"Yes." Phoebe dropped her hand and her voice softened. "I'm sorry, Elsa. You've had enough for one day, haven't you? Was it horrible, Elsa? Were you terribly frightened?"

"No, not at first. I felt sure I could find my way back. Even when I realized I was lost, I still thought I'd be all right. Then I got into a part of the caves that's new, that hasn't even been explored, and I—"

"You got into new caves?" Phoebe said incredulously. "Elsa, how could you have?"

"I don't know. But I did. I was in the same cave where Mr. Powell was lost. He described it yesterday—that's how I knew where I was. I was frightened then, Phoebe. I—" She tried to repress the shiver that ran through her at the memory.

"Elsa, you might never have got out of there."

"I know. Believe me, I thought of it, that I might be trapped there, that they might never find me."

She stopped at the sound of Woody's voice calling from outside. Phoebe heard it, too, and moved quickly to the glass doors. Elsa saw her face suddenly sharpen with alarm, and she ran to the doors. Woody was crossing the lawn toward the house, his shoulders sagging, his head bent.

Phoebe thrust open the door and stepped out onto the terrace. "Woody!" she said.

"It's Walt," he said tonelessly. "I found him in the caves, I've called the police."

"Found him?" Phoebe whispered. "Woody, Walt is—dead?"

"Yes. He was killed with a pick handle. I think he must have been struck down from behind."

He stopped as he heard Elsa's gasp. He turned slowly to look at her. "Yes, Elsa, you were in the caves when it happened. That's why the lights went out—so that you wouldn't see the murderer."

He turned away from them toward the wail of the police siren coming up the mountain road.

Slowly Elsa moved from the

window that framed the glowing mountain sunset, forced herself to face the ugly reality here in the lodge of the caverns. In a far corner of the big room Chief of Police Haney was still talking quietly with his assistant, Wes Gelb. In another corner, watching them, were Nick Powell and his sister Vivian, Woody and Phoebe Ryan, and Lola Kramer.

It had been almost two hours since Walt Carr's body had been found, and the pattern of the night before had repeated itself. There had been the same unanswerable questions, the same absence of clues, the same lack of alibis for the Powell heirs.

Woody tried to provide one for Phoebe. He had been wandering aimlessly in the fields beyond his house when he saw his wife drive past, heading toward the village. But Phoebe couldn't prove that she had gone into the town looking for Nick, after she left Vivian.

Nick said he had gone looking for Woody, but in half an hour had given up and returned to the Ryan house. And Vivian, like the others, couldn't prove that she had stayed in her room after Phoebe left her, trying to rest.

Elsa saw their tenseness heighten now as Haney strode to the center of the silent,

waiting group. His attention was directed at Vivian and with visible effort she pulled herself forward on the leather couch until she was sitting on the edge.

Haney hesitated as he saw the pitiful attempt she made to still her trembling hands. Then his jaw hardened and he looked at her with a coldness which gave no hint that he had known Vivian Powell for most of his life.

"What is it, Mr. Haney?" Vivian said. "What do you want now? What more can I tell you?"

Woody rose. "I'm afraid Vivian's at the breaking point. I don't think she can take any more, not without some rest. Let me take her home. You can talk to the rest of us."

"I'm sorry, no," Haney said flatly. "Miss Powell, it's about the letter we found this morning."

"Letter?" Vivian said with weary vagueness. "Oh, the letter to Bob. But that—that certainly can't matter now, Mr. Haney?"

"It matters very much, Miss Powell."

"How can it? Hasn't Walt Carr's death made that letter, and everything else you considered so important, meaningless now? No one could have had a reason to kill Walt. This

murderer is a madman, someone who's killing for the sake of killing, insanely."

"No. Part of the information Wes just brought me is about Walt Carr. I think we know the reason for his murder."

Impatiently Nick said, "What about Walt?"

"He had a prison record. Larceny, extortion."

"No," Phoebe said. "That nice little man—"

Lola Kramer's laugh was jeering. "I always thought there was something wrong about your nice little man. He joked about his past so much because he was hiding it. But you and Woody thought he was so cute—"

"All right, Lola; that's enough." Woody turned to Haney: "So Walt Carr had a prison record. What are you thinking?"

"I think he probably learned somehow who murdered Robert Powell. I think he tried to blackmail the murderer and ended up by being killed himself. That makes sense to me."

Lola's sharp voice interrupted him. "You said you wanted to talk about the letter. That letter involves me—Nick and me. Why don't you talk about it?"

Haney's eyes moved back to Vivian as he spoke. "I took for

granted that the letter had been written by some crank in town, but of course I had it tested. Wes just brought me the report. Your fingerprints were found on it, Miss Powell."

"Mine? Then I—I must have touched it when you showed it to us this morning."

"No: None of you touched it then. I made sure of that."

"Then I don't understand—"

"You saw that letter before I showed it to you. We know that; it's a certainty, a fact. Would you prefer to tell me about it here or down at headquarters?"

"I—yes, I'll tell you." Vivian's control had broken in a torrent. Her words came pouring out in an almost incoherent rush. "Bob—he showed me the letter, he asked me to read it. I told him it wasn't true, it couldn't be true. I begged him not to go down to the caves, but he wouldn't listen to me—"

Haney was looking at her coldly. "Don't lie to me, Miss Powell. I want to know why you wrote that letter."

"Why I wrote—you don't think that I—?"

"That letter was written on the typewriter in your room, Miss Powell. Your prints are on the letter because you wrote it."

Haney's accusation shocked the group into a stunned

silence. Now that silence exploded in a blasting chorus of voices. Lola was on her feet, raging wildly at Vivian, ~~as~~ Nick had grasped her arms and forced her back into her chair. Phoebe stood before her sister, shaking her head in revulsion.

"You did that?" she whispered. "You did that to Bob and to Nick? Vivian, how could you?"

With a sob Vivian sank back on the couch, her hands shielding her face. "I didn't think Bob would ever go down into the caves, I never dreamed he'd go. I only wanted him to know what Lola was really like, that she didn't care anything about him, just his money. That's why I wrote it—"

"You wrote that letter," Lola Kramer said. "You knew it was a lie, you knew he wouldn't find Nick and me in the caves; we wouldn't be there." With a jerk she tore herself from Nick's grasp and moved menacingly toward Vivian. "You're the one who phoned the Club and left word for Nick to come to the caves. You tried to call me, too, didn't you? You knew there was nothing between Nick and me, nothing for Bob to find out, so you tried to frame us. You tried to get us together in the caves with your lying message."

"No!" Vivian cringed back

from Lola's furious advance, turned fearfully to Haney. "I didn't do that! They were going to meet there; they planned a meeting."

"Vivian!" Nick's voice was a desperate whisper. "That isn't true! Tell them it isn't true."

Haney stepped between them and looked gravely down at Vivian, huddled on the couch. "You're sure of what you say, Miss Powell? You know for certain that Nick and Lola planned to meet?"

"I—I heard them on the phone," Vivian said. "The extension in my bedroom. Yes, I'm sure."

"All right, Miss Powell. Lola, Nick, you'll come with me now. The rest of you may leave."

Lola said, "You believe her! You believe that hysterical, lying woman!"

"I'll know better what to believe after I've talked to you and Nick alone." He touched Lola on the arm and nodded curtly toward Nick. "Let's go."

He started for the door, but stopped at the rumble of the rising elevator. A uniformed policeman hurried across the lobby toward Haney. For a moment they talked together, then Haney turned back to the others, his eyes singling out Elsa from the rest. He came to her, with a flat silver disk in his open hand.

"Is this yours, Elsa? Your initials are on it."

"Yes," Elsa said dully. "It's my compact. Thank you, Mr. Haney."

She reached out to take it, but his fingers tightened upon it. "Sandy just found it in the caves, Elsa, in the new room—the Hanging Gardens. When were you there?"

"But you know. Yesterday—when I found Mr. Powell. That's when I must have dropped it."

"That room was thoroughly searched after his murder, every inch of it. Your compact wasn't there then."

"But it must have been. Somehow you must have missed it."

He shook his head. "Even if it had been hidden there, we would have found it. But it wasn't. Sandy Martin says it was on the floor in the center of the room, beside the sailfish. You went back to that room, Elsa, didn't you? I want to know when, and why."

"But I didn't! Yesterday was the last time, the only time I was ever in that room. I don't know how it could have got there—but, Mr. Haney, why does it matter? What difference can it make?"

"I want to know how this compact got in the Hanging Gardens if you didn't lose it

there. Think, Elsa. When did you have it last?"

"I— Yes, you're right, Mr. Haney. I didn't lose it yesterday. I had it this morning, in my purse." She stopped, remembering at last when she had dropped the compact. "It must have been today, when I was lost in the caves. I fell, my purse spilled, and I tried to find my things in the darkness. The compact—I must have missed that . ." Her voice dwindled off, and she looked up at Haney with a puzzled frown.

"Yes, Elsa?"

"But I wasn't in the Hanging Gardens when I fell. I was in some room that I'd never been in before—some unopened part of the caves. That's where I dropped my purse."

Haney looked inquiringly at Woody Ryan. "Could she be right about that, Woody? Could she have got into some undeveloped caves?"

"It's not impossible," Woody said slowly. "There are several entrances, natural ones, into the other caves. But, for safety, I've blocked them. I doubt if Elsa could have stumbled onto one I've never found."

"But I did, Woody! I was in the same cave that Mr. Powell was lost in. He described it all to Walt and me."

She turned to the policeman.

"You remember, Mr. Haney, I told you last night. He said there was a formation in that cave, shaped like a fan, an open fan. I found that fan when I was lost today. I recognized it from his description. That's how I knew "

"In that case," Haney said, "there was someone in that unexplored cave *after* you were. Someone who found your compact there and took it to the Hanging Gardens."

"But why?" Elsa said. "Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know," Haney said slowly. "Maybe my guess is all wrong."

He walked away from her to the fireplace. He stood, staring down into its emptiness for a moment, then abruptly turned back to the group. "I want you to wait here, all of you."

He beckoned to Sandy and the two of them disappeared into the elevator foyer. They heard the doors slam shut, the elevator descend, and they sat waiting, silent and tense under Wes Gelb's watchful eyes.

It was a quarter of an hour before Sandy reappeared, bringing Haney's order to them. They were to be brought immediately to the Hanging Gardens. Shepherded by the two policemen, they trooped into the elevator, then dropped down into the earth.

The caves, as far as they could see into them, were flooded with light. They walked in single file down the long, twisting passageway, past the Chamber of Gold and the Little Temple, and there was no sound but the slap of their footsteps on the wet rock floors and the soft, rhythmic dripping of water. At last they came to the Hanging Gardens, and they stood mutely, questioningly, before the Chief of Police.

He moved at once to Elsa, took her arm, and led her to the center of the room, stopping in front of the Sailfish.

Over his shoulder he said, "Nick, the switch is beside you, just at your left. Will you turn the lights off?"

"No!" Vivian cried. "No, please—"

There was a click and the room was plunged instantly into blackness, the same awful, deathly blackness that Elsa remembered from that morning. Even with the others standing so near her, with Nick still at the light switch, she knew the terror of the caves again, and she shuddered.

Haney was close beside her; gently he urged her forward. "The Sailfish," he said. "Touch it, Elsa; feel it."

Slowly she reached out her hands; her fingers touched the cold, damp stone. Then, quick-

ly now, she ran her hands over its fluted surface, and back again, and she caught her breath in a sharp gasp.

"It's the same," she said. "It's the same rock—"

"It's the fan, isn't it, Elsa?"  
"Yes, I—I'm sure."

"It's the fan you touched when you were lost this morning. It's the one Robert Powell found when he was trapped down here." In a louder voice, he said, "Will you turn the lights on again, Nick?"

With an almost blinding flash the room lit up and Elsa stood staring at the Sailfish before her. This was where she had been when she thought herself hopelessly lost—here in the Hanging Gardens. And the fan that she had been so horrified to touch was only the sail of the fish.

Looking at it, at the brilliant-hued body topped by the sculptured sail, it was a fish. But in the darkness the vivid body of the fish was nothing more than a slab of stone, and the sail seemed simply a fan, a lady's huge fan.

She turned away from the formation, looked slowly, wonderingly about the big beautiful room and remembered the tortured hours that Robert Powell had spent in it, so that it seemed suddenly a place of horror. She tried in

vain to suppress the shiver that ran through her.

"This is the place where he was trapped," she whispered. "It was right here, in this room, where Mr. Powell almost died."

Woody was moving toward Haney, his face puzzled. "Is this why you brought us down here?" he asked. "Is this what you're trying to prove?"

"Yes, I had to find out. I had to know for sure that this is the room where Bob Powell was trapped."

"And you think you have proved it?" Woody asked. "Just because Elsa thinks this is the same formation that Bob described to her?"

"Elsa is sure," Haney said, his voice tight. "You heard her."

Woody turned to Elsa, and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled down at her. "Elsa, you know these caves pretty well. You know how many strange formations there are in them. There are hundreds, Elsa, thousands, maybe. And simply because one in this room is shaped like a fan, it doesn't mean it's the same room where Bob was trapped."

"But he described it to me, Woody! It must be the same one, it— Oh, no! No, Woody, I'm wrong; of course I'm wrong!" She stepped toward the policeman. "You see, don't

you, Mr. Haney? Woody's known about this cave for years and years, long before the accident. He knew how to get here through the other caves. If this was where Mr. Powell was trapped, Woody could have got to him; he could have rescued him—"

She stopped, and the room was deathly still.

It was Phoebe Ryan who spoke at last, looking at her husband with dazed, tragic eyes. "Is that it, Woody? Is that what happened? You could have got to Bob, you could have brought him up safely. And you didn't. You left him here all those hours while the men dug through to him. You knew every minute counted, that Bob might be dead before they reached him—but you left him here."

Woody looked at her dumbly, unable to speak his protests, only shaking his head in denial.

"That's what Bob found out yesterday when he came down here and saw this room. He learned the truth about you at last, didn't he, Woody?"

"No— Phoebe, listen to me—"

She turned away from him. "Woody murdered Bob. That's what you wanted to show us, isn't it, Mr. Haney? That's why you brought us down here."

"Yes, that's what I think, Mrs. Ryan. That's how it happened, isn't it, Woody? You found Robert Powell in this room yesterday. He told you what he had discovered, and you killed him."

"No, you can't realize what you're saying. Don't you remember why Bob came down here yesterday? What he found down here? He saw Lola and Nick together. Do you believe that at a time like that he'd give a single thought to an accident that happened years ago—or to me?"

"He didn't find Lola and Nick here, Woody." Haney moved to stand in front of Vivian, forcing her to meet his eyes. "There's nothing to be afraid of now, Miss Powell. You're not going to be accused of murder; you don't have to lie any longer. You didn't hear Nick and Lola arranging to meet here, did you?"

"No," Vivian whispered. "I lied."

"It was you who called Nick?"

"Yes."

"And Lola—what about her?"

"No, I—I tried to call her. I couldn't get her. She wasn't down here; she couldn't have been."

Haney came slowly, heavily back to Woody Ryan. "You

heard, Woody. It wasn't Nick and Lola that Bob Powell found down here. It was the truth about you. He learned that you had wanted him to die—and he knew why. That accident was a long time ago. You didn't know then that the highway would be built here, that you could turn these caves into the gold mine they are today. You thought the only way you could get your hands on that money was if Bob Powell died and your wife inherited it. He realized all that yesterday when he saw this room—and you had to murder him."

"No," Woody said, "listen to me."

"Elsa," Haney said, "Walt Carr was with you yesterday, wasn't he? He heard Bob Powell's story about being trapped in the caves, about the fan?"

"Yes," Elsa said. "Walt was with us."

"He put the facts together, didn't he, Woody—just as I have? And he tried to blackmail you. That's why Walt was killed."

"No, you're wrong, you're all wrong! Why would I murder Walt? Why would I have murdered either of them? What if everything you've said is true? What if I could have rescued Bob and didn't? There's nothing he could have done to

me now—I didn't commit any crime; he couldn't prove that I'd done anything."

Haney shook his head. "He wouldn't have needed any proof, Woody. He didn't need the law for his revenge. The road to the caves goes through his property; he controlled it. If he closed that road, there'd be no way to get up here from the highway. That would be the end of your caves, Woody. You'd be back where you started—a farmer again, with nothing but a lot of worthless mountain land. That's what he threatened to do to you, isn't it? And that's why you murdered him, to save yourself, your fortune."

Woody lowered his head. "All right. It's just like you said. I was surprised when I saw Bob going down into the caves, so I followed him. When he recognized the Hanging Gardens, I tried to bluff it out. But he knew. After I—I killed him, I planned to hide the body, but Elsa came down, so I rushed over to the Three Witches, where she found me. Funny thing, I guess she blundered onto the same entrance this

morning in the dark. I didn't mean it to end up this way. I hoped things might work out all right."

Then he hunched his shoulders and said, "Let's get out of here, Haney. Let's get it over with."

Silently, in a dreary procession, they filed from the room. In a moment Lola Kramer walked slowly away. Elsa heard the parade of footsteps echoing back through the passages outside; then it was quiet. She turned uncertainly toward the others, Vivian huddled against the cold wall, Phoebe and Nick standing like stone beside her.

"Vivian," Nick said at last, "I'll take you home now."

"No." With an effort Phoebe seemed to rouse herself. She stepped between them. "I'll take her; I'll stay with her tonight. You go with Elsa, Nick. It's going to be all right with you and Elsa now."

"Yes," Nick said. He turned to Elsa and she came to him, felt his arms strong and comforting about her. Then, her hand tight in his, they went out of the caves, up into the warm clean air.



# Michael Innes

## Dead Man's Shoes

*Young Derry Fisher, an up-and-coming real-estate agent, had a curious adventure on the 8:05 train back to London. As an opening situation you will find it (as the very pretty and very frightened young girl found it) a "disturbing episode"—and irresistible reading.*

*This short novel, complete in this volume, stars Commissioner Sir John Appleby and poses a very pretty (and very frightening) problem—a queer fish of a case, odd, puzzling, ingenious, and in the most literate tradition of English crime writing*

### Detective: SIR JOHN APPLEBY

Catching the 8:05 train had meant an early start for Derry Fisher. A young man adept at combining pleasure with business, he had fallen in with some jolly people in the seaside town to which his occasions had briefly taken him, and on his last night he had danced into the small hours.

As a result of this he was almost asleep now—and consequently at a slight disadvantage when the panting and wide-eyed girl tumbled into his compartment. This was a pity. It was something that had never happened to him before.

"Please . . . I'm so sorry . . . I

only—" The girl, who seemed of about Derry's own age, was very pretty and very frightened. "A man—" Again speech failed her, and she swayed hazardously on her feet. "You see, I was alone, and—"

But by this time Derry had collected himself and stood up. "I'm afraid you've been upset," he said. "Sit down and take it easy. Nothing more can happen now."

The girl sat down—but not without a glance around the empty compartment. Derry guessed that she badly felt the need of some person of her own sex. "Thank you," she said.

This time she had tried to

smile as she spoke. But her eyes remained scared. It suddenly occurred to Derry that part of the nastiness of what had presumably happened must be in its anonymous quality.

"My name is Derry Fisher," he said. "I work for an estate agent in London, and I've been down to Sheercliff on a job. I caught this train so as to be back in the office after lunch."

Whether or not the girl took in this prosaic information Derry was unable to tell. Certainly she did not, as he had hoped, do anything to supply her own biography. Instead, she produced a handkerchief and blew her nose. Then she asked a question in a voice still barely under control. "I suppose I must look an utter fool?"

Derry resisted the temptation to say that, on the contrary, she looked quite beautiful. It mightn't, in the circumstances, be in terribly good taste. So he contented himself with shaking his head.

"Not a bit," he said. "And I wish I could help in any way. Did you have any luggage in the compartment you had to leave? If you did, may I fetch it for you?"

"Thank you very much." The girl appeared steadied by this unexciting proposal. "I have a green suitcase, and the compartment is the last one in

this coach. But first I should tell you about the man."

Derry doubted it. He knew that, unless the man had been so tiresome that he ought to be arrested, it would be wise that no more should be said. The girl could tell her mother or her best friend later in the day. She would only regret blurting things to a strange man.

"Look here," he said, "I wouldn't bother about the chap any more—not unless you feel it's only fair to other people to bring in the police at Waterloo. In that case I'll see the guard. But at the moment I'll fetch the suitcase. And you can think it over."

"I don't think you understand."

Derry paused, with his hand already on the door to the corridor. "I beg your pardon?"

"Please stop—please listen." The girl gave a sharp laugh that came out unexpectedly and rather uncomfortably. "I see I've been even more of a fool than I thought. You've got the—the wrong impression. The man didn't—"

Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and spoke savagely from behind them. "It was nothing. I imagined it. I must be hysterical."

Derry, who had sat down again, kept quiet. He knew that women do sometimes get round

to imagining things. This girl didn't seem at all like that. But no doubt it was a trouble that sometimes took hold of quite unexpected people.

"I mean that I imagined its *importance*. I certainly didn't imagine the *thing*. Nobody could have a—a hallucination of that sort."

As if nerving herself, the girl put her hands down and looked straight at Derry. "Could they?"

It was Derry who laughed this time—although he could scarcely have told why. "Look here," he said. "I think I *have* misunderstood. What was it?"

"It was his shoes."

For a moment the girl's glance was almost helpless, as if she was aware of the absurd anti-climax <sup>so</sup> that this odd statement must produce.

"It was something about his shoes."

The engine shrieked, and the express plunged into a tunnel. In the wan electric light which had replaced the early summer sunshine, Derry stared at the girl blankly.

"You mean—this isn't about anything that *happened*?"

"No—or yes and no." For a moment the girl appeared to struggle for words. Then she squared herself where she sat. "May I tell you the whole thing?"

"Please do—I'm awfully curious." Derry spoke sincerely. The story, whatever it might be, was not going to be an awkward chronicle of attempted impropriety. "You did say *shoes*?"

"Yes. A brown shoe and a black one."

The train had returned to daylight. This did not prevent Derry Fisher from a sensation of considerable inner darkness. "You mean that this man—"

"Yes. He is wearing one brown shoe and one black.... How incredibly trivial it sounds."

"I don't know. It's not a thing one ever sees."

"Exactly!" The girl looked gratefully at Derry. "And when you see it, it gives you a shock. But the real shock was when he saw that *I* saw it. You see?"

Derry smiled. "Not really. Hadn't you better start at the beginning?"

"The beginning was at Sheercliff. I thought I'd only just caught the train myself, but this man cut it even finer than I did. He tumbled in just as we started to move. With any sort of baggage he couldn't have managed it. But he had nothing but a brief case."

"Is he tidily dressed apart from this business of the shoes?"

The girl considered. "He

certainly isn't noticeably untidy. But what chiefly strikes me about his clothes is that they look tremendously expensive. He's in the sort of tweeds that you could tell a mile off, and that must be terribly good if they're not to be ghastly."

"Is he a loud sort of person himself?"

"Not a bit. He's middle-aged and intellectual-looking, and quite clearly one of nature's First Class passengers. I think he jumped into a Third in a hurry and hasn't bothered to change. He simply put his brief case down beside him—there were only two of us in the compartment—and disappeared behind *The Times*."

"I had a book, and I didn't do much more than take a glance at him. It wasn't perhaps for half an hour that I noticed the shoes. They gave me a jar, as I've said. And although I went on reading, the queerness of it stuck in my head. So presently I had another look, just to make sure I hadn't been mistaken. And as I looked, *he* looked. That is to say, he happened to glance over *The Times*, saw the direction of my eyes, and followed it."

"What he discovered was a terrific shock to him. His legs jerked as if he'd been stung, and his feet made a futile effort to disappear beneath the seat. I

looked up in surprise and just caught a glimpse of his face before he raised *The Times* again. He had gone a horrible gray, as if he was going to be sick. It made me feel a bit sick myself. And matters didn't improve when he turned chatty."

"But not, surely, about the shoes?"

"Yes, about the shoes. He put down his paper and apologized for them—just as if the compartment was my drawing room and he felt that he had come into it too casually dressed."

"He made a kind of joke of it?"

"That was what he seemed to intend. But he was very nervous. He was smoking those yellow cigarettes—aren't they called Russian?—and he kept stubbing out one and lighting another. He asked me if the shoes made him look like an absent-minded professor."

"And what did you say to that?"

Derry guessed that it was doing the girl good to talk about her queer encounter. And it sounded merely eccentric rather than sinister. Presently she ought to be able to see it as that.

"I said it didn't, somehow, look like a thing which absent-mindedness would ex-

plain. I said it *ought* to, that it was the sort of thing one might make an absent-minded person do in a story, but that when one actually *saw* it that just didn't seem to fit."

Derry Fisher smiled. "You gave him quite good value for his money. It was what might be called a considerable reply."

"Perhaps. But he didn't like it." To Derry's surprise the girl's agitation was growing again. "I suppose I was tactless to do more than murmur vaguely. He stubbed out another cigarette, and I felt a queer tension suddenly established between us. It was a horrid sensation. And what he said next didn't at all ease it. He said I was quite right, and that he wasn't at all absent-minded. He was color blind."

Derry was puzzled. "That's certainly a bit odd. But I don't see—"

"I happened to know that it was almost certainly nonsense."

This time the girl sounded slightly impatient; and Derry decided, quite without resentment, that she was cleverer than he was. "I'm not absolutely certain that color blindness of that sort doesn't exist. But I know that anything other than the ordinary red-green kind is excessively rare. So this was a very tall story. And, of course, I had another reason for disbe-

lieving him. Wouldn't you agree?"

Derry stared. "I'm afraid I don't at all know."

"If this man is unable to distinguish between black and brown, he couldn't possibly have received such a shock the moment his glance fell on his shoes. Don't you see?"

"Yes—of course." Derry felt rather foolish. "And what happened then?"

"This time I didn't say anything. I felt, for some reason, really frightened. And I was even more frightened when I detected him cautiously trying the handle of the door."

"The door to the corridor?"

"No. The door on the other side."

Derry Fisher, although not brilliant, had a quick instinct for the moment when action was desirable.

"Look here," he said, "it's about time I had a look."

And with a reassuring glance at his companion he rose and stepped into the corridor.

They were moving at considerable speed and had been doing so steadily since some time before the beginning of his encounter with the frightened girl. He walked up the train in the direction she had indicated, glancing into each compartment as he passed. In one there was a group of young airmen, mostly

asleep; in another a solitary lady of severe appearance seemed to be correcting examination papers; in a third an elderly clergyman and his wife were placidly chatting.

Derry came to the last compartment and saw at a glance that it was empty.

Conscious of being both disappointed and relieved, he stepped inside. The girl's green suitcase was on the rack. On the opposite seat lay an unfolded copy of *The Times*. There were three yellow cigarette butts on the floor. The window was closed.

Derry felt obscurely prompted to make as little physical impact on the compartment as might be. He picked up the suitcase and went out, shutting the corridor door behind him.

The girl was still sitting where he had left her, and he set the suitcase down beside her. "He's gone," he said.

"Gone! You don't think—"

"It's very unlikely that anything nasty has happened." Derry was reassuring. "The window is closed, and he couldn't have chucked himself out without opening the door. In that case, it would be open still. Nobody clinging to the side of the train could get it shut again, even if he wanted to. Your tiresome friend has just made off to another

carriage. It's the end of him—but quite harmlessly."

"He could only have gone in the other direction, or we'd have seen him."

"That's perfectly true. But he naturally would go off in the opposite direction to yourself. And the greater length of the train lies that way. It's more crowded, too, at that end. He realizes that he's made an ass of himself, and he's decided to submerge himself in the crush."

The girl nodded. "I suppose you're right. But I haven't really told you why I bolted." She hesitated. "It's too fantastic—too silly. I didn't think he had any notion of killing himself. I rather thought he was meaning to kill *me*."

The girl laughed, and it was her unsteady laugh again. "Isn't it a disgusting piece of hysteria? It must mean that my subconscious mind just won't bear looking into."

"Rubbish." Derry felt it incumbent to speak with some sternness. "This chap is a thoroughly queer fish. It was perfectly reasonable to feel that he might be quite irresponsible. You say he actually began fiddling with the door-handle?"

"Yes. And I really thought that he was thinking out what you might call two coordinated movements—getting the door open and pitching me through

it. And when I did get up and leave, I felt that it was a terrific crisis for him. I sensed that he was all coiled up to hurl himself at me—and that he decided in the last fraction of a second that it wouldn't do."

The girl stood up. "But this is all too idiotic. And at least I already see it as that—thank goodness." She smiled rather wanly at Derry. "I shall go along and try the effect of a cup of coffee."

"May I come, too?"

"I'd rather you didn't. But you've already been terribly kind. You've helped me pull myself together. It's just that I feel I can finish the job better alone."

Left in solitude, Derry Fisher reflected that he had learned very little about the girl herself—nothing at all, indeed, except the disturbing episode in which she had found herself involved. Might he, when she returned, ask for her name—or at least attempt a more general conversation?

The probability was that he would never see her again; and this was a fact which he found himself facing with lively dissatisfaction. Her appearance in his compartment had been the sort to make his imagination expect some further succession of strange events, some romantic sequel.

But when the girl did return, her own manner was notably prosaic. Coffee and reflection seemed further to have persuaded her that she had already dramatized an insignificant circumstance too much. She remained grateful and talked politely. But Derry guessed that she felt awkward, and that at Waterloo she would be glad to say goodbye, both to him and to the whole incident.

So he forebore to make any suggestion for the bettering of their acquaintance. Only when the train reached the terminus he insisted on accompanying her through the barrier and to the taxi rank. The man who had scared her—the man with the black and brown shoes—must be somewhere in the crush; and if, as seemed likely, he was crazy, there was a possibility that he might bother her again.

But they caught no sight of him.

The girl gave an address in Kensington and stepped into her cab. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much."

Derry took his dismissal with a smile. "Goodbye," he said. "At least, you're safe and sound."

Her eyes widened, and then laughed at him. "Yes, indeed. He can't dispatch me now."

The cab moved off. Derry, stepping forward to wave

regardless of the traffic, was nearly bowled over by one of the next cabs out; inside it, he glimpsed a man's amused face as he skipped nimbly to safety. He had been in danger, he saw, of making an ass of himself over that girl. He hurried off to catch a bus . . .

Shortly after lunch Derry went in to see his uncle—at present his employer, and soon, he hoped, to be his partner. Derry sat on one corner of his uncle's desk—a privilege which made him feel slightly less juvenile—and gave an account of himself. He described his few days at Sheercliff and his labors there on behalf of the firm.

His uncle listened with his customary mingling of scepticism and benevolent regard, and then proceeded to ask his customary series of mild but formidably searching questions. Eventually he moved to less austere ground. Had Derry got in any tennis? Had he found the usual agreeable persons to go dancing with?

On these topics, too, Derry offered what were by now prescriptive replies, whereupon his uncle buried his nose in a file and gave a wave which Derry knew was meant to waft him from the room.

All this was traditional. But as he reached the door his uncle looked up again. "By the way,

my dear boy, I see you left Sheercliff just before the sensation there."

"The sensation, Uncle?" Only vaguely interested Derry saw his relative reach for a newspaper.

"An unidentified body found on the rocks in mysterious circumstances—that sort of thing."

"Oh." Derry was not much impressed.

"And there was something rather unaccountable. Now where did I see it?" Derry's uncle let his eye travel over the paper now spread out before him. "Yes—here it is. The body was fully dressed. But it was wearing one black shoe and one brown . . . My dear boy, are you ill? Too many late nights, if you ask me."

At nine o'clock that morning—it was his usual hour—Superintendent Lort had come on duty at Sheercliff Police Station and found Captain Merritt waiting for him. The circumstance gave Lort very little pleasure. He was an elderly man, soon to retire, and he had felt from the first that Merritt belonged to a world that had passed beyond him.

Merritt was an ex-army officer, and so to be treated with decent respect. His job was that of bodyguard—there could

be no other name for it—to a certain Sir Stephen Borlase, who had been staying for some weeks at the Metropole Hotel. It was not apparent to Lort why Borlase should require protection other than that provided by the regular police.

Merritt, it appeared, was paid by the great industrial concern whose principal research chemist Borlase was. But it was an important Ministry that had yanked Merritt out of one of the regular Security Services and seconded him to the job. Borlase's research, it seemed, was very much a work of national importance. And so there was this irregular arrangement. This *most* irregular arrangement, Lort said to himself now—and greeted his visitor with a discouraging glare.

"Borlase has vanished." Merritt blurted out the words and sat down uninvited. He looked like a man whose whole career is in the melting pot. Probably it was.

"Vanished, sir? Since when?"

"Well, since last night—or rather very early this morning. I saw him then. But now he's gone. His bed hasn't been slept in."

"Do I understand, Captain Merritt, that it is part of your—um—employment to visit Sir Stephen Borlase's

bedroom before nine A.M., and at once to communicate with the police if he isn't found there?"

"Of course not, man. The point is that he hasn't *slept* there. And that needs inquiring into at once."

"But surely, sir, such an inquiry is what you are—paid for?"

"Certainly. But I naturally expect the help of the police." Merritt was plainly angry. "Borlase is a damned important man. He is working now on the devil knows what."

"That probably describes it very well." And Lort smiled grimly. "But are we to raise an alarm because this gentleman fails to sleep in his hotel? I know nothing of his habits. But the fact that he has been provided with a somewhat unusual—um—companion in yourself suggests to me that he may not be without a few quiet eccentricities."

"He's a brilliant and rather unstable man."

"I see. But this is not information that has been given us here in our humdrum course of duty. Do I understand it is thought possible that Sir Stephen may bolt?"

Merritt visibly hesitated. "That's not for me to say. I am instructed merely to be on guard on his behalf. And you,

Superintendent, if I am not mistaken, have been instructed to give me any help you can."

"I have been instructed, sir, to recognize your function and to cooperate. Very well. What, in more detail, is the position? And what do you propose should be done?"

"Part of the position, Superintendent, I think you already know. Sir Stephen is here as a convalescent, but in point of fact he can't be kept from working all the time. Apparently his stuff is so theoretical and generally rarefied that he can do it all in his head, so all he needs to have about him is a file or two and a few notebooks.

"He has been pottering about the beach and the cliffs during the day, as his doctors have no doubt told him to do. And then, as often as not, he has been working late into the night. It has made my job the deuce of a bore."

"No doubt, sir." Lort was unsympathetic. "And last night?"

"He sat up until nearly one o'clock. I have a room from which I can see his windows, and it has become my habit not to go to bed myself until he seems safely tucked up. You can judge from that how this job has come to worry me. Well, out went his lights in the end, and I was just about to

undress when I heard him open the outer door of his suite.

"He went downstairs. It seemed to me I'd better follow; and when I reached the hall, there he was giving a nod to the night porter and walking out of the hotel. He hadn't changed for dinner, and in his tweeds he might have been a visitor leaving the place for good. He was merely bent, however, on a nocturnal stroll."

"It was a pleasant night, no doubt." Lort offered this comment impassively.

"Quite so. Sir Stephen's proceeding was no more than mildly eccentric. But if I'd let him wander off like that in the small hours, and if anything *had* happened, it would have been just too bad for both of us. So I took that stroll, too—some fifty yards in the rear.

"He went straight through the town and took the short cliff path out to Merlin's Head. It's an extremely impressive spot in full moonlight, with the sheer drop to the sea looking particularly awe-inspiring, I imagine. Of course there was nobody about. And as there is only the one narrow path to the Head, I didn't follow him to the end of it. He doesn't like being dogged around."

"I'm not surprised." Lort was emphatic. "I don't know what things are coming to that

such antics should be considered necessary in a quiet place like this. But go on."

"You will remember that there's a little shelter on the verge of the Head, with a bench from which you can command the whole sweep of the bay. Borlase disappeared into that, but didn't sit for long. Within ten minutes he was making his way back towards me—and at that I slipped out of sight and followed him discreetly back to the hotel.

"Perhaps I should mention having a feeling that there was something on his mind. His walk out to the Head had been direct and decisive. But on the way back he hesitated several times, as if doing a bit of wool-gathering. So I kept well in the background, and he had gone to his bedroom by the time I re-entered the hotel. I waited, as usual, until his lights were out, and then I turned in."

"And now, you say, he has vanished?"

"Yes. I've got into the way of taking him his letters in the morning. That is how I've discovered that he never went to bed at all."

Lort frowned. "But you say all the lights went out in his suite? Could there have been one still burning when you went to bed yourself—one that wouldn't be visible to you?"

"I think not."

"And the night porter? Was he aware of Borlase's leaving again?"

"No. But he potters around a little, although not supposed to quit the hall. I doubt if it was difficult for Borlase to let himself out unobserved."

Merritt paused. "And that, Superintendent, is the position now. What do you make of it?"

"I'm far from feeling obliged to make anything of it at all." Lort allowed himself some tartness in this reply. "Here is a man, devoted to abstruse scientific thought, who takes a reflective stroll at one o'clock in the morning. Moonlight doesn't help with whatever problem he's chewing over, so for a time he sits in the dark and tries that."

"Presently he wanders out again, and very probably walks till morning. Eventually he emerges from his abstraction, discovers himself to be uncommonly hungry, breakfasts at the first inn he sees, returns to Sheercliff at his leisure, and finds that the conscientious Captain Merritt has persuaded the police to start a manhunt."

And Lort favored his visitor with a bleak smile. "The truth may not be precisely that. But my guess is that I'm well within the target area."

"I see." Merritt had pro-

duced his watch and glanced at it. Now he put it away and turned a cold eye on the elderly and sardonic man before him. "And you think mine a very odd job?"

"I do, sir—decidedly."

"And so it is, Superintendent. But then Borlase, as it happens, is a very odd man. Just how odd, I think I must now take the responsibility of telling you."

"I am very willing, sir, to hear anything that makes sense of your anxieties."

"Very well—here goes." Merritt paused as if to collect himself. "Perhaps I can best begin by repeating what I have just said—but with a difference. The Borlases are a very odd couple of men."

Lort stared. "You mean there is a brother—something like that?"

"I mean nothing of the sort. I mean that Sir Stephen Borlase—the man stopping at the Metropole Hotel—is much more easily understood as two people than as one."

Lort sat back in his chair. "Jekyll and Hyde?"

"Or Hyde and Jekyll. That is undoubtedly the popular expression of the thing, and perhaps the best for laymen like you and me, Superintendent, to hang onto. Or possibly we might think of him as a sort of

Hamlet—the man who couldn't make up his mind."

"Frankly, sir, I don't find this easy to believe. I suppose Dr. Jekyll may have been a man of some scientific attainment, but I can't see Hamlet as an eminent research chemist."

"Perhaps not." Merritt took a moment to estimate the cogency of this pronouncement. "But the fact is that Borlase combines immense drive and concentration as a scientist with a highly unstable personality. Commonly his ideological convictions are very much those of any other man of his sort in our society. For the greater part of his days, that is to say, he is completely reliable. But every now and then he is subject to a fit of emotional and intellectual confusion, and from this there emerges for a short time what is virtually a different personality.

"It's an awkward thing in the days of the cold war, as you can see. Let certain folk effectively contact Borlase when he has swung over to this other polarity—this other set of values—and goodness knows what they might not get out of him. And now I think you can understand why I was given my 'unusual' job—and why I think the present situation genuinely alarming."

"I still feel, sir, that I've a

good deal to learn." Lort was clearly preparing to plod doggedly round the strange story with which he had been presented. "Am I to understand that Sir Stephen Borlase is fully aware of his own condition?"

"In a general way—yes. But he plays it down. When normal, he declines to admit that these periods of disturbance go, so to speak, at all deep. He won't treat himself as potentially a mental case. Nothing in the way of regular visits by the appropriate sort of medical man would be tolerated by him. So he has been persuaded that he is in the first flight of V.I.P.s—as indeed he pretty well is—and provided with—"

"—the new style of guardian angel represented by yourself." Lort, having given his cautious antagonism this further airing, reached for a scribbling pad as if to indicate that the matter had entered a new phase. "Have you been given to understand that there does now exist against Borlase a specific threat? Are there, in fact, supposed to be persons aware of his condition and actively planning to exploit it?"

"It is thought very likely that there are—particularly a fellow called Krauss."

"I see. And you have been told what signs to look for in Borlase himself?"

"He is said to go moody, restless, distraught—that sort of thing."

Lort nodded. "What about the last few days? Has he appeared all right?"

"The devil of it is, Superintendent, that he has always appeared a bit of a queer fish to me. I can't claim to have noticed any change in the last few days."

"Then, Captain Merritt, it remains my guess that this is a false alarm. When did you leave the Metropole—half an hour ago? Likely enough, Borlase has returned in the interval. I'll call the place up and find out."

Two telephones stood on Lort's desk—and now, as he was in the act of reaching for one, the second emitted a low but urgent purr.

The Superintendent picked it up. "Yes . . . Yes . . . Dead, you say? . . . Where?"

Lort's glance, as he listened, fleetingly sought Merritt's face. "The tide? If that was so, you did perfectly right . . . Unidentified? I hope he remains so . . . I said, I hope he remains so . . . Never mind why . . . Yes, of course—within ten minutes. Thank you."

When Lort had snapped down the receiver, there was a moment's silence. Merritt had gone pale, and when he spoke it was with a curious striving for a

casual note. "Not, I suppose, anything to do with—?"

"Probably not." Lort was on his feet. "Still, you might care to come along—just in case."

"In case—?"

"In case it is the body of Sir Stephen Borlase that has just been found below Merlin Head."

"Accident?"

The Superintendent reached for his cap. "That's what we're going to find out."

The sky was almost cloudless, the air filled with a mild warmth, the sea sparkling within its farflung semicircle of gleaming cliffs. On the front and in the broad tree-lined streets, visitors made their way to and from the baths, the Winter Gardens, the circulating libraries, or exercised well-bred dogs with due regard to the cleanliness and decorum which is so marked a feature of the Sheercliff scene.

As he drove the agitated Captain Merritt through this pleasing pageant, Superintendent Lort discernibly let his spirits rise. But the effect of this was only to give a more sardonic turn to his speech. An accident, he pointed out, whether in the sea or on the cliffs, was an undesirable thing. The City Council deprecated accidents. Accidents were dis-

sulsive; potential visitors read about them and decided to go elsewhere.

But a crime was another matter. Many pious and law-abiding Sheercliff citizens would ask for nothing better than a really sensational crime. The present season, it was true, was somewhat early. Even a murder extensively featured in the national Press would have little effect on Metropole or Grand or Majestic folk. But the August crowds—the true annual bearers of prosperity to the town—were another matter. A course of events culminating in the Central Criminal Court in about the third week of July, Superintendent Lort opined, would probably take three-pence off the rates.

Captain Merritt showed no appreciation of this unexpected vein of pleasantry in his professional colleague. He sat silent during the drive. He remained silent in the small police station which they entered at the end of it. Here a melancholy sergeant led them out to a shed at the back for the purpose, as he expressed it, of viewing the remains. This, however, was for some minutes delayed. With a due sense of climax the sergeant chose to pause in the intervening yard and favor his superior with a fuller account of the case.

An elderly clergyman, early abroad in the interest of birdwatching, had been the first to peer over Merlin Head and see the body. It lay sprawled on an isolated outcrop of rock at the base of the cliff, and only by an unlikely chance had it not fallen directly into the sea. Had this happened, it would probably have disappeared—at least, as an identifiable individual—for good. For the currents played strange tricks on this coast, and it was only after some weeks that the sea commonly rendered up its dead.

On this point the sergeant was disposed to be expansive. "Nibbled, sir—that's how they often are. Some quite small fish, it seems, are uncommonly gross feeders. But come along."

On this macabre note the three men entered the shed. The body lay on a long table, covered with a sheet. The sergeant stepped forward and drew back the sheet so that the face was revealed.

"It's your man, all right." Lort's voice was decently subdued.

"It's my man." Merritt, very pale, glanced at the sergeant. "Any certainty how it happened?"

"The back of the head's stove in. He might have been hit, and then thrown over the

cliff. Or he might just have jumped and the damage been done by the rocks. The surgeon thinks they'll be able to tell just which, once they've gone into the body more particular."

"I see." Merritt moved closer to the body, gave a startled exclamation, and drew the sheet down farther. "It's Sir Stephen Borlase, all right. But those aren't his clothes. At least, I never saw him in them."

Lort frowned. "He wasn't dressed like this when you followed him last night?"

"He wasn't in anything like this dark stuff at all. He was in country kit—a tweed with rather a bold pattern."

"Peculiar." Lort turned to the sergeant. "Anything on those clothes—a tailor's label with the owner's name, for instance?"

"Nothing of the sort, sir. I'd say they were ordinary, good-class, off-the-peg garments. But there's something queer about the shoes."

"They don't fit?" Lort pounced on this.

"It's not that. It's this."

The sergeant, his sense of drama reasserting itself, whipped away the sheet altogether. "Did you ever see a corpse in one black shoe and one brown?"

"Suicide." Lort had driven

halfway back through Sheercliff before he spoke. "Suicide planned so that it could never be proved. Borlase was simply going to disappear. When you followed him last night—or rather early this morning—he was spying out the land. Or it might be better to say the cliff and the sea."

"Look before you leap?" Merritt was moodily stuffing a pipe.

"Just that. And perhaps he didn't like what he saw. You told me that he walked up there briskly enough, yet his return to the Metropole was a bit irresolute. But he went through with the thing. Knowing that he had to give you the slip this time, he changed into those anonymous clothes in the dark—which is how he managed to land himself with different-colored shoes."

"That may be true," Merritt was suddenly interested. "And the shoes were, in fact, to give him away! It might be one of those odd tricks of the mind—and particularly of a mind like Borlase's. Part of him didn't want anonymity and extinction—so he made this unconsciously motivated mistake and betrayal. An instance of what Freud calls the psychopathology of everyday life."

"No doubt." Superintendent

Lort did not appear to feel that his picture of the case was much strengthened by this speculation. "Well, Borlase slipped out again later, and simply pitched himself over Merlin Head. He reckoned to go straight into the sea and to be drawn out by the current. Later we might or might not have got back an unrecognizable body in unidentifiable clothes. Of course, further investigation may prove me wrong. But I'd say it's a fair working supposition. Do you agree?"

Without interrupting the business of lighting his pipe, Captain Merritt shook his head. "I don't see it. Borlase was an odd chap, or I wouldn't have been given my job. He might, I suppose, feel driven to take his own life. And he might feel the act to be disgraceful—as something to disguise. But why not disguise it as an accident? He had plenty of brains to work out something convincing in that way. Why should he try to make his death look like an unaccountable disappearance?"

"Might it be because he disliked you, sir?"

"What's that?" Merritt was startled.

"I mean, of course, disliked the way you'd been set on him. He resented having a jailer disguised as a bodyguard—and quite right, too, if you ask me."

Lort delivered himself of this sentiment with vigor. "So he resolved to leave you in as awkward a situation as he could. Had he seemed just to clean vanish, you'd have been left looking decidedly a fool."

"I see." Merritt digested this view of the matter in silence for some seconds. And when at length he pronounced upon it, it was with unexpected urbanity. "Well, Borlase is dead, poor devil—and it's a bad mark for me either way. I'll be quite content myself if your interpretation is accepted by the Coroner."

"But you doubt whether it will be?"

"I do." And Merritt puffed at his pipe with a somber frown. "My guess is that there's more to come out, Superintendent. And probably with more bad marks attached. The country has lost Stephen Borlase. I have a nasty feeling it may have lost something else as well."

Derry Fisher felt rather like the Bellman. "What I tell you three times is true." It was just that number of times that he had now told his story: first to his uncle, then at the local police station, and now—rather to his awe—to Sir John Appleby, high up in this quiet room in New Scotland Yard.

Appleby himself, Derry saw, must be pretty high up. He was, in fact, a Commissioner. Derry was already guessing that the strange situation in which he found himself involved was important as well as conventionally-sensational.

Appleby was not at all portentous. His idea of police investigation appeared to be friendly and at times mildly whimsical conversation. But Derry sensed that he was feeling pretty serious underneath.

"And you say you saw this girl into a taxi? But of course you did. Pretty or not, it was the natural and proper thing for you to do. And then you took the next taxi yourself?"

"No, sir." Derry shook his head, genuinely amused. "I found my natural level on top of a bus."

"Quite so. Taxi queues at these big stations are often longer than bus queues, anyway. I suppose there was a queue—streams of taxis going out?"

"Yes, sir. Parts of our train had been pretty crowded. I had to wait a moment while several more taxis shot past. One of them nearly bowled me over."

"Did you find yourself staring at people's shoes?"

Derry burst out laughing. "As a matter of fact, I did. I keep on doing it now."

"You do, indeed. You had a look at mine the instant you entered this room." And Appleby smiled genially at his embarrassed visitor. "You'd make a good detective, Mr. Fisher, I don't doubt. And you tell your story very clearly."

"To tell you the truth, sir, I'm very relieved to find it credited. It seems so uncommonly queer."

"We get plenty of queer yarns in this place." Appleby companionably held out a box of cigarettes. "But of yours, as a matter of fact, we have a scrap of confirmation already."

Derry Fisher sat up eagerly. "You've heard from the girl?"

"Not yet—although we ought to hear today, if she ever looks at a newspaper or listens to the radio. Unless, of course—" Appleby checked himself. "What we've had is news of an angry traveler at Waterloo, complaining of theft from his suitcase while he was absent from his compartment."

"Isn't that sort of thing fairly common?"

"Common enough. But this was on your train from Sheercliff this morning. And what was stolen was a pair of shoes—nothing else. I've no doubt that you see the likely significance of that. By the time you had got to Waterloo, there was certainly nobody on your

train in the embarrassing position of wearing a discernibly odd pair of shoes. Only the dead body in Sheercliff was still doing that . . . By the way, have you any ideas about this?"

Derry, although startled, answered boldly. "Yes, sir. At least, I see one way that it might have come about. The two men—this Sir Stephen Borlase who is dead and the man who was on the train—for some reason changed clothes rather hastily in the dark. And they mixed up the shoes."

Appleby nodded approvingly. "That's very good. Borlase, as a matter of fact, has been found in clothes which, it seems, can't be positively identified as his. Correspondingly, the clothes which your girl described as worn by the fellow on the train sound uncommonly like those being worn by Borlase when he was last seen alive. He may, of course, have been dead when the exchange took place. Indeed, that would seem to be the likely way of it. I wonder, now, what it would be like, changing clothes with a dead man—say, with a murdered man—in the dark."

"I'm sure I'd mix up a good deal more than the shoes." Derry Fisher's conviction was unfeigned. "One would have to possess nerves of steel to do so ghastly a thing."

"Either that or be in an uncommonly tight corner. You'd be surprised at the things that timid or even craven people will brace themselves to when really up against it."

Appleby paused, then mused, "But aren't we supposing a darkness that can't really have been there? Unless, of course, we can place the thing in a cave or cellar or shuttered room."

"The moonlight!"

"Precisely. I asked myself about that during my last phone call to Sheercliff half an hour ago. There can be no doubt that there was a full moon in an unclouded sky. I daresay you were aware of it yourself."

"Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I was dancing in it."

"Then, there you are." Appleby appeared much pleased. "Are you fond of Rubens as a landscape painter?"

"Rubens?" Derry felt incapable of this abrupt transition to a polite cultural topic. "I'm afraid I don't know much about him."

"He has one or two great things done in full moonlight. Everything marvelously clear, you know, but at the same time largely drained of color." Appleby chuckled. "If you knocked me out by the light of the moon, Mr. Fisher, you

could exchange clothes with me without the slightest difficulty. But you might very well go wrong over brown and black shoes. My guess is that they wouldn't be indistinguishable to a careful scrutiny, but that they would be the next thing to it . . . And now I must really go across to Waterloo. I should be obliged if you'd come along."

"While you investigate?"

"Just that. You might be a great help to me."

"I'll certainly come." Derry stood up—and suddenly a new view of this invitation came to him. "You don't mean to lose sight of me?"

"That is so." For the first time Appleby spoke with real gravity. "You may as well know, Mr. Fisher, that this affair may be very serious indeed. Nobody will be lost sight of until it is cleared up."

"You make me wish I hadn't lost sight of the girl."

"I wish you had not. We must face the fact that she is the only person who can identify the man on the train—the living man in the odd shoes."

Slowly it dawned on Derry. "And I—?"

"You are the only person who can identify the girl, supposing—well, that she is no longer in a position to speak up for herself."

"You think she may be in danger?"

"I'd like to know who was in the next taxi or two after hers."

It chanced that the morning train from Sheercliff had been neither broken up nor cleaned through, and a clerk led them to it over what, to Derry, seemed miles and miles of sidings. It stood forlorn, dusty, and dead, in the rather bleak late-afternoon sunshine.

Once aboard, Derry had less difficulty than he had expected in identifying the compartment in which his adventure had begun. It looked very impersonal and uninteresting now. He felt suddenly depressed, and watched with growing scepticism the minutely careful search that Sir John Appleby made.

"This fellow who complained of losing shoes," Appleby said. "Where was he?"

The clerk consulted some papers. "We have a note of that, sir. It was three carriages down, next to the dining car. The passenger had gone to get himself an early lunch, leaving his suitcase on the seat of the empty compartment. When he got back, he found it open, with the contents tumbled about, and a pair of shoes missing. Of course he has no claim."

"Except on our interest," Appleby turned to Derry. "Now, I wonder why our elusive friend didn't substitute his own troublesome footwear and close the case? That *would* have given the other fellow a bit of a shock. But perhaps it was no occasion for a display of humor."

Appleby spoke absently. His glance was still darting about the uncommunicative compartment, as if reluctant to give up. Then he stepped into the corridor and moved up the train.

"A group of airmen," he said, "mostly asleep. A solitary lady. A clergyman and his wife. Is that right?"

Derry nodded. "Quite right."

"And then the compartment where your girl made her awkward observation. If you don't mind, I'll go into this one alone."

He did so, and moved about as if the whole place was made of eggshell. Derry watched fascinated. His scepticism was entirely gone. To his own eye the compartment looked blank and meaningless. Yet it suddenly seemed impossible that to so intent and concentrated scrutiny it should not at once yield some decisive fact.

"You can still smell what she called the Russian cigarettes."

Appleby spoke over his shoulder. "And here are the three yellow stubs you saw yourself. I at once produce pill boxes and forceps. Also a pocket lens."

Derry glimpsed the railway clerk watching wide-eyed as Appleby actually performed these legendary operations. "I sniff. This tobacco—my dear Watson—is manufactured only in Omsk. Or is it Tomsk? At any rate, I distinctly begin to see Red. Only Commissars are ever issued with this particular brand. The plot thickens. The vanished man has a slight cast in his left eye. A joint—one of the lower ones—is missing from his right forefinger . . ."

On this surprising rubbish Appleby's voice died away. Regardless of the two men waiting in the corridor, he painfully explored the confined space around him for a further fifteen minutes. When he emerged he was wholly serious. And Derry Fisher thought that he saw something like far-reaching speculation in his eye.

"Those young airmen, Mr. Fisher—you say they were asleep?"

"Not all of them."

"And the clergyman and his wife?"

"Chatting and admiring the view."

"On the far side?"

"No, the corridor side."

"And the solitary lady?"

"She struck me as a headmistress, or something of that sort. She was working at papers."

"Absorbed in them?"

"Well—not entirely. I think I remember her giving me rather a formidable glance as I went by. You think these people may have seen something important, sir?"

"They are a factor, undoubtedly." Appleby was glancing at his watch. "I must get back. The mystery of the rifled suitcase is something that we needn't pursue. What we want is your girl. And there ought to be word of her by now. What would be your guess about her when she reads all this in the papers? Is she the sort who might lose her head or panic and lie low?"

"I'm sure she's not. She would see it was her duty to come forward, and she'd do so."

"Kensington, you said—and you absolutely didn't hear any more?" Appleby had dropped to the line and they were now tramping through a wilderness of deserted rolling stock. "And you gleaned absolutely nothing about her connections—profession, reason for having been in Sheercliff, and so on?"

"I'm afraid I didn't." Derry hesitated. "It wasn't because I

didn't want to. But she'd had this shock, and it would have seemed impertinent—”

“Quite so.” Appleby was curtly approving. “But I wish we had just the beginning of a line on her, all the same.”

Derry Fisher for some reason felt his heart sink. “You really do think, sir, that she may be in danger?”

“Certainly she is in danger. We must find her as soon as we can.”

Back in his room half an hour later, and with Derry still in tow, Appleby was making a long-distance call.

“Stephen Borlase?” The cultivated voice from Cambridge wasted no time. “Yes, certainly. I have no doubt that I count as one of his oldest friends. The news has saddened me very much. A wonderful brain, and on the verge of great things . . . Mentally unbalanced? My dear sir, we all are—except conceivably at Scotland Yard. I know they were worried about Stephen, but if I were you I'd take it with a pinch of salt. He was not nearly so mad as Mark is if you ask me.”

“Mark?”

“Mark Borlase—Stephen's cousin. Haven't you made contact with him?” The voice from Cambridge seemed sur-

prised. “Mark is certainly next of kin . . . Address? I know only that he lives in a windmill. From time to time I should imagine that he goes out and tilts at it . . . Precisely—an eccentric. He goes in for unworldliness and absence of mind . . . The same interests as Stephen? Dear me, no. Mark is literary—wrote a little book on Pushkin, and is a bit of an authority on Russian literature in general. An interesting but ineffective type.”

“Thank you very much.” Appleby was scribbling on a desk pad. “Just one more thing. I wonder if you can tell me anything significant about Sir Stephen's methods of work?”

“Yes.” The voice from Cambridge took on extra precision. “It happened in his head, and went straight into a small notebook which he kept in an inner pocket. That—and perhaps a few loose papers lying rather too carelessly about—was nowadays pretty well his whole stock-in-trade. I hope that notebook's safe.”

“So do I. Sir Stephen had a bodyguard who ought to have kept an eye on all that. I expect to reach him at any time. You'd say that the notebook may be very important indeed?”

“My God!” And the telephone in Cambridge went down with a click.

As Appleby dropped his own receiver into place, a secretary entered the room. "A caller, sir—somebody I think you'll want to see about this Sheercliff affair."

Derry Fisher was conscious of sitting up with a jerk as Appleby swung round to ask crisply, "Not the girl?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. A cousin of the dead man. He gives his name as Mark Borlase."

"Bring him in," Appleby turned back to Derry. "Lives in a windmill and pops up as if he were answering a cue. He may interest you, Mr. Fisher, even though he's not your girl. So stay where you are."

Derry did as he was told. Mark Borlase was a middle-aged, cultivated, untidy man. He had a charming smile and restless, tobacco-stained hands. His manner was decidedly vague, and one felt at once that his natural occupation was wool-gathering. Only good breeding and a sense of social duty, Derry guessed, kept him from relapsing into complete abstraction.

"Sir John Appleby? My name is Borlase. They got hold of me from Sheercliff, and asked me to come along and see you here. This about Stephen is very sad. I liked him, and hope he liked me. We had nothing to say to each other, I'm afraid—

nothing at all. But he was a good sort of person in his dry way. I'm very sorry that his end should be a matter of policemen and inquests and so forth. I wonder what I can do?"

As he spoke, Mark Borlase produced a pair of glasses from a breast pocket and clipped them on his nose. "Perhaps I could identify the body—something like that?"

And Mark Borlase looked slowly round the room, as if confidently expecting a corpse in a corner. Not finding this, he let his glance rest mildly on Derry Fisher instead. "This your boy?"

"Your cousin's body is naturally at Sheercliff, Mr. Borlase. It has been adequately identified. And this gentleman is not my son"—Appleby smiled faintly—"but Mr. Derry Fisher, who happened to travel up from Sheercliff this morning in circumstances which give him an interest in your cousin's death."

"From Sheercliff this morning? How do you do?" And Mark Borlase gave Derry a smile which, for some reason, sent a prickling sensation down the young man's spine. "You were a friend of poor Stephen's?"

"No—nothing of that sort. I never knew him. It's just that on the train I ran across a—another passenger who'd had

a queer experience—one that seems to connect with Sir Stephen's death. That's why the police are interested in me."

"Indeed." Mark Borlase did not appear to find this ingenuous explanation sufficiently significant to hold his attention. He turned his mild gaze again to Appleby. "They say, you know, that there were times when Stephen wasn't quite himself."

"But you have no personal experience of that?"

"I didn't see him very often. Of course, we corresponded occasionally."

"About what?"

Mark Borlase seemed momentarily at a loss. "Well—don't you know—this and that."

"You said a moment ago that you and Sir Stephen had nothing at all to say to each other. Can you be a little more specific about the this and that which were mentioned in your letters?"

"As a matter of fact"—and Mark Borlase hesitated—"Stephen got me to look at things for him from time to time."

"Things, Mr. Borlase?"

"Articles in Russian. It's my subject."

"I see." And Appleby nodded. "Articles, that would be, in learned and scientific journals? His own stuff?"

"Dear me, no." Mark Borlase evinced a sort of absent-minded amusement. "I'm a literary person, and would be no good on anything technical. Stephen had his own experts to do all that sort of thing."

"Philosophy, then—and sociology and so forth? He used you to acquaint himself with untranslated writings of—well, an ideological cast?"

Mark Borlase's hand moved uneasily. "Is this what they call a security check? But it *was* matter of that sort. Stephen had an intermittent—but occasionally intense—interest in Communist theory and the like. I'm bound to confess that it irritated me very much. Not the doctrine—I don't give twopence for one political doctrine or another—but the style. I like my Russian good."

"You would have viewed with indifference your cousin's entering upon treasonable courses, but would have deprecated his continued concern with inelegant Russian prose?"

Rather surprisingly, Mark Borlase was on his feet and flushing darkly. "Damn it all, man, you understand the conversation of gentlemen better than that. I don't give a tinker's curse, I say, for one or another sort of hot air. But of course I wouldn't have a kinsman make a fool of himself

and disgrace the family if I could help it. I used to translate or explain whatever rubbish Stephen in these occasional fits sent along—and do my best to laugh at him for his pains."

"And you were never seriously uneasy?"

Mark Borlase's hesitation was just perceptible. "Never. I realize there has been a certain amount of sinister talk. Stephen himself told me that some fool of a Cabinet Minister had decided he was a dangerously split personality, and that Stephen had been plagued with a lot of nonsense as a result. For all I know, such idiocy may have driven Stephen to suicide."

"I sincerely hope not." Appleby's tone was sober. "And I am sorry, Mr. Borlase, to have had to sound you on some rather unpleasant ground. It was good of you to come along so quickly. One of my assistants may want a little routine information at your convenience in a day or two. At the moment I have only one further question. When did you see your cousin last?"

This time Mark Borlase answered promptly. "Six weeks ago. And he was perfectly well. I'm at the Wessex, by the way, should you want me."

"Thank you very much."

For some moments after the

door closed on Mark Borlase there was silence. Appleby sat quite still, lost in thought. Then he turned to Derry, "Well?"

"I've seen him before."

"What?"

"I've seen him before. It came to me when he smiled. I've seen him quite recently."

"Be careful, man." Appleby had sat up at his desk, square and severe. "This sort of thing is new to you—and sometimes it sets people to fancying things. We don't want a false scent. So think."

Derry's mouth was dry and he guessed that he looked strange. For a full minute he, too, sat quite still. "I know I've seen him recently—and it connects with Sheercliff."

"Mark may be like Stephen in personal appearance. And you may have caught a glimpse of Stephen down there in the streets."

"No—I've seen *him*." Derry felt his heart pounding. "In a taxi . . . smiling . . . driving out of Waterloo today."

Sir John Appleby appeared quite unsurprised. "That is capital. It looks as if we are on the track of something at last. Let us suppose that you are not mistaken. The overwhelmingly probable inference is that Mark Borlase was himself to Sheercliff, and traveled back by the same train as yourself."

"Then he lied, didn't he? He said he hadn't seen his cousin for six weeks."

"It certainly sounds like a lie. But he may have gone down intending to see Stephen, and then for some reason changed his mind. You didn't manage to see how he was dressed?"

Derry shook his head. "I'm afraid not. He *may* have been in those tweeds of Stephen's. All I saw was his face—leaning forward, and rather amused that I had to skip out of the way of his cab. But look here, sir"—Derry was suddenly urgent—"it was the cab immediately behind the girl's. Could he have followed it, and tracked her down? Can one really tell a taxi driver to do that? It's always happening in stories."

Appleby smiled. "Certainly one can. Men occasionally want to follow girls without necessarily having it in mind to commit murder. You can imagine cases in which the motive might even be laudable. And most taxi drivers wouldn't mind a bit of a chase. Try it sometime."

Derry, although accustomed by now to the intermittent levity of the Commissioner, was rather shocked. "But, sir, oughtn't we... I mean, if there's a chance he knows where to find her—"

"Quite so. One or two arrangements must certainly be made." Appleby was scribbling as he spoke, and now he touched a bell. "Here they are." He held up a sheet of paper and then handed it to his secretary. "See that this is acted on at once, Hunt, please. And are there any developments?"

"Captain Merritt has arrived."

"Excellent. Show him in." Appleby turned to Derry. "The man who knows all about the Sheercliff end. It will be a bad business if we don't get somewhere now." He frowned. "And also, perhaps, if we do."

Captain Merritt was military, brisk, and (Derry suspected) inwardly somewhat shattered. He listened to what Appleby had to say, nodded an introduction to the young man, and plunged straight into his own narrative.

"I waited in Sheercliff for the doctors to make up their minds. It seems there can be no doubt about what happened, and that the local man's notion of suicide is all wrong. Borlase was killed by a terrific blow on the head, and then within a few minutes was pitched over the cliff. I've tried to get medical help on the clothes. You know how scalp wounds, even when only superficial, bleed in a profuse and alarming way? I

wondered if the clothes he was wearing when killed would remain presentable."

Appleby nodded. "A good point."

"But the leeches won't be positive one way or the other. It isn't certain there would have been any great mess. It's my bet now that the murderer stripped the dead man of his clothes and got him into the ones he was found in."

"I agree." Appleby was incisive. "But why? What was the situation?"

"I was the situation, if you ask me." And Merritt laughed, but without much mirth. "As I see it now, the murder happened not on a second trip of Sir Stephen's to Merlin Head, but on the first and only trip. I saw Sir Stephen go up there. I thought I saw him come down. But all I really saw were his clothes. In fact, I came a first-class crash."

"It's certainly a possibility." Appleby spoke with a hint of professional commiseration. "And can you name the man who fooled you?"

"Krauss."

Appleby nodded. "I gather he may be involved. The Minister made a great point of it when he phoned me."

"You see, Krauss—" Merritt hesitated. "Is Mr. Fisher here interested in Krauss?"

Appleby smiled. "I don't think it will much endanger the country, Mr. Fisher, to tell you about Krauss. He is a foreign agent whom we suspect of specializing in approaching scientists with the object of extracting secret information from them. Krauss's is the ideological and not the venal approach. We don't know that he has ever had much success. But it is believed that he keeps on trying. And Captain Merritt is perfectly correct in saying that Krauss is supposed to have been on the track of Sir Stephen Borlase. So Krauss is a likely suspect enough."

Appleby turned to his colleague. "Fisher and I, as it happens, have another one. But carry on."

"Another suspect?" Merritt was startled.

"Not a bad one. But first come, first served. So continue."

Merritt laughed. "Very well. Here is the crime as I see it. Stephen Borlase was an unstable fellow, with fits in which he didn't very well know his own mind on certain vital matters. As a result, Krauss got a long way with him—got, in fact, as far as Merlin Head in the small hours of this morning.

"He persuaded Borlase to an appointment there—to a moonlight conference in the little

shelter by the cliff edge. The meeting, however, was a failure. Borlase was not disposed, after all, to see treason as a higher duty. Conceivably he never was. These, after all, are jumpy times. If they were not, some of us would be out of a job."

"Quite so."

"Krauss, then, was stuck. And, being stuck, he struck." Merritt paused, as if mildly surprised at his own command of the resources of English. "Primarily he was out to suborn Borlase. But there was this other possibility. Borlase carried on his person notes that were the vital growing point of his researches. These would be enormously worth stealing—and particularly if the brain capable of producing them could simultaneously be destroyed forever. That is why Krauss killed Borlase."

"If he did."

"I'm only putting a case." Merritt was patient. "Now, what would be the first thing one would do after committing murder and robbery? I think one would scout around. Krauss took a peer out from that cliff shelter—and just glimpsed me at the far end of the path leading to it. He would realize the situation and see that it was pretty grim."

"Grim enough to take the fantastic risk of donning Bor-

lase's clothes and hoping to evade you that way?"

"Yes. And it wasn't really so fantastic. He would know I was being as unobtrusive as possible, and that I would keep well back."

"It's a first-class hypothesis." Appleby drummed absently on the desk before him. "But one point worries me. Borlase was found in *entirely* strange clothes. Why a *complete* exchange? And why bother to redress the corpse at all?"

"Krauss suddenly tumbled to the significance of the cliff, the sea, and the currents. With luck, he could get rid of the body for days or weeks. That would be valuable in itself. Moreover, if it was then recovered entirely unidentifiable, either in its own person or by any of its clothes, the eminent Sir Stephen Borlase would simply have disappeared without explanation. There was a neat little propaganda trick to take in that."

"Very well. Krauss—or another—effects this change of clothes and then pitches the body into the sea. Or rather, *not* into the sea. It lands on a small outcrop of rock. And so the murderer's plan—as you see it, that is—partly fails. Now, there is a point that occurs to me there. Suppose the murder-

er, for some reason, was—so to speak—aiming not at the sea but at that rock. Would it have been a practical target? Could he have reckoned on keeping the body from the sea?"

Merritt frowned. "I'm not clear about the bearing of your question."

"Conceivably it has none. But one ought, I think, to consider the question *Accident or design?* on every occasion that one possibly can."

"I entirely agree." Merritt thought for a moment. "Yes, I think the rock would prove, if one experimented, a reasonably easy target."

"Well, then—let's go on. The disguised Krauss, with Borlase's notebook in his pocket, does succeed in getting past you."

"I'm afraid so. But he is by no means out of the wood. There I am, discreetly behind him. If he wants to avoid suspicion, there is only one natural thing for him to do at the end of this nocturnal stroll. He must return to Borlase's hotel. He must accept the risk of being confronted, face on, by a night porter. Moreover, he probably has no more than Borlase's key as a clue to what room he must make for. And he must find it before I, in my turn, regain the Metropole."

"In fact, it was all pretty sticky—without knowing it he

had made the ghastly slip-up over the shoes and was now wearing one of Borlase's and one of his own."

"Exactly. But he did get to Borlase's suite quite safely. Later he crept out again and took the first train to town. He can't, I think, have had any base in Sheercliff, or he would have made for it first and got into other clothes."

Derry Fisher had listened fascinated to this hypothetical reconstruction of events in which he himself had been obscurely involved. Now he broke in. "This man Krauss, sir—have you ever seen him?"

Merritt nodded. "Certainly. I was given an unobtrusive view of a good many of his kidney when I took on my present job."

"Could he be described as middle-aged and intellectual-looking; and does he smoke Russian cigarettes?"

"I don't know about his smoking, although there are people who will. But the description certainly fits."

"It certainly fits." Appleby nodded thoughtfully. "But it would fit Mark Borlase as well."

"Mark Borlase?" Merritt was puzzled.

"Stephen's cousin. They don't seem to have briefed you on the family, Merritt, quite as they should. Mark Borlase

appears to have traveled up from Sheercliff today, although he has kept quiet about it. Fisher here saw him at Waterloo—and believes that he may even have followed the taxi of the girl who spotted the shoes. When I hear of anybody claiming actually to have seen your friend Krauss there, I shall begin to take rather more interest in him.

"Meanwhile, I'll keep my eye on Cousin Mark. You don't happen to be a member of the Wessex? A pity. He told us he's putting up there for the night. You could have taken a peep at him for yourself."

"I'm going to do my best to take a peep at Krauss." Captain Merritt rose. "I haven't much hope for that notebook—but one never knows. Those fellows have peculiar ways. He may hold onto it till he gets his price."

"There's some comfort in that. Or Mark Borlase may."

Merritt moved to the door. "I think your Mark Borlase is a rank outsider."

"Fisher and I have our money on him, all the same."

When Merritt had departed, Appleby looked at his watch. "I wonder," he asked, "if you would care for a cup of tea? We make astonishing tea at the Yard. And capital anchovy toast."

"Thank you very much." Derry Fisher was disconcerted. "But oughtn't we—?"

Appleby smiled. "To be organizing the siege of the Wessex—or otherwise pushing effectively about? Well, I think we have an hour to relax in."

Derry stared. "Before—before something *happens*?"

"Before—my dear young man—we take a long shot at finally clearing up this odd business of a dead man's shoes."

"A black shoe and a brown—how very curious!"

"What did you say?" Jane Grove set down her teacup with a surprising clatter.

"And—dear me!—at Sheercliff." Jane's aunt, enjoyably interested, reached for a slice of cake. "You might have run into it. Which just shows, does it not? I mean, in the midst of life we are in death."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jane's voice trembled slightly.

"Something in the paper, dear." Jane's aunt propped the folded page against the milk jug. "A poor man found dead beneath the cliffs quite early this morning."

"Early this morning!"

"And something about another man. Will you have a third cup?"

"No. Go on."

"I intend to, dear. I *always* take three cups."

"I mean about the other man."

"The other man? Oh, yes. He seems to have traveled on a train, and to have worn mixed-up shoes, too. There are people at Scotland Yard who want any information about him."

"May I see?" Jane took the evening paper and read without speaking.

"It couldn't be a new fashion?"

"A new fashion, Aunt?"

"Wearing different-colored shoes. *Two* men, you see. But one—of course—now dead."

Jane laughed a little wildly. "No—not a new fashion." She got abruptly to her feet. "I think I must—"

"Yes, dear?"

Jane hesitated. "I must water the pot. You might like a *fourth* cup."

She performed this commonplace action with a steady hand, and when she spoke again her tone was entirely casual. "I'm afraid I have to go out."

"To go out again, Jane—after your long day?"

"I—I've got to do something I forgot. It's rather important."

Jane fetched her handbag and gloves. "I don't suppose I shall be very long."

"Very well, dear. But don't forget—you can't be too careful."

Jane Grove jumped. "Careful?"

"Of the traffic, dear. So dangerous nowadays."

Jane, standing by the window, smiled wryly. The quiet Kensington road was deserted. She lingered for some minutes. Then, as if reproaching herself for some lack of resolution, she hurried out.

Sir John Appleby's tea and anchovy toast, although it had all the appearance of being a leisurely and carefree affair, had a steady accompaniment of messages dispatched and received. Finally, Appleby's secretary came in and spoke with a trace of excitement.

"Fifteen Babcock Gardens, sir. And at five forty-five."

"Good." Appleby rose briskly. "He did as he was told, and said he'd walk?"

"Yes. He's making for the Green Park now."

"That gives us all very good time. You've got three cars out?"

"They should be pretty well posted by now. We've studied the maps and had a report from the section."

Appleby nodded and signaled to Derry Fisher to follow him. "And what sort of

problem does this house in Babcock Gardens look like presenting?"

"Tricky, sir—but it might be worse. At a corner, but very quiet. All the houses there have basements with areas. There's a deserted cabmen's shelter over the way." The secretary hesitated. "Are you taking a bit of a risk, sir?"

"That's as it will appear." Appleby's tone suggested that he found this question not wholly in order. "And now we'll be off."

"Your car's outside, sir—with the short-wave tested and correct."

Below, a discreetly powerful limousine was waiting, and into this Derry Fisher found himself bundled. It had a table with street plans, and it was filled with low-pitched precise speech. Appleby had no sooner sat down than he joined in. The effect, as of an invisible conference, was very exciting.

Derry had been involved in this sort of thing before—but only in the cinema. He rather expected the car to go hurtling through London with a screaming siren. The pace, however, proved to be nothing out of the ordinary. Turning into the Mall, they moved as sedately as if in a procession. Carlton House Terrace seemed to go on forever, and the Royal Standard flutter-

ing above Buckingham Palace drew only very slowly nearer. When they rounded Queen Victoria on her elaborate pedestal and swung round for Constitution Hill, it was at a speed that seemed more appropriate to sightseers than to emissaries of the law.

But if the car dawdled, Derry's mind moved fast—much faster than it was accustomed to do in the interest of his uncle's business. He had never heard of Babcock Gardens, but he guessed that it was an address in Kensington—and the address, too, which he had failed to hear the girl giving at Waterloo that morning. And somebody was walking to it—walking to it through the Green Park. And Appleby had acknowledged that the girl was in danger, and Appleby's secretary had let slip misgivings over the riskiness of what was now going on.

What was now going on?

Quite clearly, the setting of a trap.

*Appleby was setting a trap, with the girl as bait.*

"I ought to tell you that there may be a little shooting before we're through."

Derry jumped. Appleby, apparently unconscious of any strain, had murmured the words in his ear. "Shooting, sir—you mean at the girl?"

"But all this is a very long shot." Appleby had ominously ignored the question. "It mayn't come off at all. But it's going to be uncommonly labor-saving if it does . . . I think we turn out of Knightsbridge at the next corner."

Derry was silent. He felt helpless and afraid. The crawl continued. Appleby was again absorbed in listening to reports and giving orders. But he had time for one brief aside.

"Complicated, you know. Lurking for lurkers. Requires the policeman's most catlike tread. Not like marching up and making an arrest in the name of the law."

Again Derry said nothing; he didn't feel at all like mild fun. Suddenly the pace increased. Appleby's dispositions—whatever they were—appeared to be completed.

The car now ran through broad, quiet streets between rows of solidly prosperous-looking houses. Presently it turned left into a narrower road, and then left again into what seemed a deserted mews. And there it drew to a halt.

Appleby jumped out. "The unobtrusive approach to our grandstand seat."

Derry followed. "A grandstand seat?"

"We are at the back of Babcock Gardens. A surprised

but obliging citizen is giving us the run of his dining room. Number fifteen is opposite."

It seemed to Derry Fisher afterward that what followed was all over in a flash. The dining room of the obliging citizen was somber and Victorian, and this gave the sunlit street outside, viewed through a large bay window, something of the appearance of a theatrical scene—an empty stage awaiting the entrance of actors and the beginning of an action.

Suddenly it was peopled—and the action had taken place. The house opposite stood at a corner. Round this came the figure of a man, glancing upward, as if in search of a street number.

Derry had time only to realize that the man looked familiar when the door of number 15 opened and a girl came down the steps. It was the girl of Derry's encounter on the train that morning.

She had almost reached the footpath when she staggered and fell—and in the same instant there came the crack of a revolver shot.

The man was standing still, apparently staring at her intently. Derry could see only his back. But he now knew that it was the back of Mark Borlase.

Borlase took a step forward. Simultaneously another figure

leaped across the road—it must have been from the corresponding corner—and made a dash for Borlase. It was Merritt. What he intended seemed to be a flying tackle.

But before he could bring this off, yet another figure dramatically appeared. A uniformed policeman, hurling himself up the area steps of number 15, took the charging Merritt in the flank and brought him crashing to the ground. In an instant there were policemen all over the place.

"Come along." Appleby touched the horrified Derry Fisher on the arm. They hurried out. Mark Borlase had not moved. Shocked and bewildered, he was looking from one side to the other. On his left, Merritt had been hauled to his feet, and stood collared by two powerful Constables.

On his right, still sprawled on the steps of number 15, lay the girl—a pool of blood forming beneath one arm.

Derry ran toward her, his heart pounding. As he did so, she raised herself, and with a groping movement found her handbag. For a moment, and with a queerly expressionless face, she gazed at Merritt and at the men who held him. Then with her uninjured arm she opened her bag, drew out a small glittering object, and

thrust it into her mouth.

"Stop her!"

Appleby's cry was too late. Another revolver shot broke the quiet of Babcock Gardens. Incredibly—incredibly and horribly—Derry Fisher's beautiful girl had blown her brains out.

Late that evening Appleby explained.

"There was never much doubt, Mr. Borlase, that your cousin had been murdered. And clearly the crime was not one of passion or impulse. The background of the case was international espionage. Sir Stephen was killed in order to obtain an important scientific secret and to eliminate the only brain capable of reproducing it. There may have been an attempt—conceivably by the man Krauss—to get at Sir Stephen by the ideological route. But that had certainly come to nothing. You agree?"

Mark Borlase nodded. "Stephen—as I insisted to you—was really perfectly sound. He worried me at times, it is true—and it was only yesterday that I felt I ought to go down and have a word with him. Actually, we didn't meet. I got him on the telephone and knew at once that there was no question of any trouble at the moment. So I concealed the fact that I was actually in

Sheercliff, put up at the Grand for the night, and came back this morning. I ought to have been franker when you challenged me, no doubt."

"It has all come out straight in the wash, Mr. Borlase. And now let me go on. Here was a professional crime. This made me at once suspicious of the genuineness of any *mix-up* over those shoes. *But they might be a trick designed to mislead.* And if that was so, I was up against a mind given to doing things *ingeniously*. I made a note that it might be possible to exploit that later.

"Now the train. I came away from my inspection of it convinced that the girl's story was a fabrication from start to finish. The fact stared me in the face."

Derry Fisher sat up straight. "But how *could* it? I've chewed over it again and again—"

"My dear young man, these things are not your profession. This girl, representing herself as badly frightened, ignored three compartments—in two of which she would have found feminine support and comfort—and chose to burst in on a solitary and suitably impressionable young man of her own age."

"Again, while the mysterious man with the different-colored shoes would certainly have retreated *up* the train, the rifled

suitcase was *down* the train—the direction in which the girl herself went off unaccompanied, for her cup of coffee.

"Again, the Russian cigarettes had discernibly been smoked in a holder. On one of them, nevertheless, there was a tiny smear of lipstick."

Appleby turned to Derry. "I think I mentioned it to you at the time."

"Mentioned it?" Derry was bewildered—and then light came to him. "When you made that silly—that joke about seeing Red?"

"I'm afraid so. Well now, the case was beginning to come clear. Sir Stephen's body had been dropped on that rock, and not into the sea, deliberately; we were *meant* to find it in the strange clothes and the unaccountable shoes—otherwise the whole elaborate false trail laid by the girl on her railway journey would be meaningless."

"But *why* this elaboration? There seemed only one answer. To serve as an alibi, conclusive from the start, for somebody anxious to avoid any intensive investigation. My thoughts turned to Merritt as soon as he produced that streamlined picture of Krauss as the criminal."

Mark Borlase nodded. "And so you set a trap for him?"

"Precisely. But first, let me give you briefly what my guess

about Merritt was. He had been offered money—big and tempting money—to do *both* things: get the notebook and liquidate Sir Stephen. He saw his chance in Sir Stephen's habit of taking that nocturnal stroll. Last night he simply followed him up to the Head, killed and robbed him, and dressed the body in clothes he had already concealed for the purpose, including the odd shoes.

"Then he dropped the body over the cliff so that it would fall just where it did, returned to the Metropole, and telephoned his confederate to begin playing *her* part on the 8:05 this morning. The girl—her name was Jane Grove—was devoted to him. And she played her part very well—to the end, I'd say."

For a moment there was silence in the room. Then Derry asked, "And your trap?"

"It depended on what is pretty well an axiom in detective investigation. A criminal who has—successfully, he thinks—brought off an ingenious trick will try to bring off another, twice as ingenious, if you give him a chance. Still guessing—for I really had no evidence against Merritt at all—I gave him such a chance just as irresistibly as I could.

"The girl, you see, must come forward, and repeat the

yarn she had told on the train. That was essential to the convincingness of the whole story. It was, of course, a yarn about encountering a man who doesn't exist. For this *nobody* I determined to persuade Merritt to substitute a *somebody*: yourself, Mr. Borlase. You had been on that train and had concealed the fact.

"I let Merritt have this information. I gave him the impression that I strongly suspected you. I let slip the information that you could be reached at your club, the Wessex. And as soon as Merritt had left I got a message to you there myself, explaining what I wanted and asking you to cooperate. You did so, most admirably, and I am very grateful to you."

Mark Borlase inclined his head. "A blood hunt isn't much in my line, I'm bound to say. But it seemed proper that Stephen's murder should be brought to book."

Derry Fisher looked perplexed. "I don't see how Merritt—"

"It was simple enough." Appleby broke off to take a telephone call, and then resumed his explanation. "Merritt represented himself to Mr. Borlase on the telephone as my secretary and asked him to come to my private address—

which he gave as fifteen Babcock Gardens—at five forty-five. He then got in touch with the girl and arranged *his* trap."

Appleby smiled grimly. "He didn't know it was *our* trap, too."

"He was going to incriminate Mr. Borlase?"

"Just that. Remember, you would have been able to swear that you saw Mr. Borlase leaving Waterloo in a taxi just behind the girl. From this would follow the inference that Mr. Borlase had tracked her to her home; and that after his interview here he had decided that he must silence her."

"But Merritt didn't himself mean to—to kill the girl?"

"He meant to stage an attempted murder by Mr. Borlase, and to that he must have nerved her on the telephone."

Mark Borlase suddenly shivered. "He was going to have me arrested, after he had himself winged the girl? He would have said the revolver was mine—that sort of thing?"

"Yes. He may even have meant to kill you, and maintain that it had happened in the course of a struggle or self-defense. Then the girl would have identified *you* as the man with the odd shoes. And that would have been that."

"How would he have explained being on the scene—there in Babcock Gardens, I mean—at all?"

"By declaring that I had prompted him to go and have a look at you at your club and that he had spotted you coming out and had decided to shadow you. It would have been some such story as that. He had lost his head a bit, I'd say, in pursuit of this final ingenuity. It was criminal artistry, of a sort. But it was thoroughly crazy artistry as well."

"And Stephen's notebook?"

"That telephone call was to say it has been found with Merritt's things. Merritt thought himself absolutely safe, and he was determined to hold out for the highest possible price."

Appleby rose. "Well, that's the whole thing. We shall none of us be sorry to go to bed."

As they said goodbye, Derry Fisher hesitated. "May I ask one more question?"

"Certainly."

"The shooting in Babcock Gardens was an afterthought of Merritt's—and I think it was the afterthought of a fiend. But why—after you had examined the train and guessed nearly the whole truth—did you tell me that the girl was in danger?"

"She was in danger of the gallows, Mr. Fisher. But at least she has escaped *that*."

# Helen McCloy

## Of Time and Murder (Better Off Dead)

*After fifteen years Stephen Longworth—a new man with a new name—returns to Yarborough. He has two contradictory aspects: he is a potential murder victim—and he has already been murdered. Now he wanted to resolve that paradox, to learn the truth—a murder victim investigating his own murder!*

*This short novel, complete in this volume, is the real McCloy—compact in texture with a flashing mosaic of detail and a tantalizing mystery—a case without a clue, without a motive, without evidence, and fifteen years old . . .*

### Detective: STEPHEN LONGWORTH

**H**is name could not betray him. They had known him as Frank Bly. He was Stephen Longworth now. Would anyone in Yarborough remember his face? After fifteen years?

He turned to look into the beveled pier glass that came with this apartment at the Waldorf. His hair was flecked with steel-gray now, at thirty-two. At seventeen, when he was last in Yarborough, his hair had been brown, his face plump, his skin tanned by that long summer on the water. His mouth then was a boy's, loose-lipped, plastic as clay. This was another face, lean and

pale, with a man's hard mouth. The eyes were still a lively hazel, set wide under slanting brows. Yet they had changed most of all. They had lost a boy's trust in others and doubt in self.

It was years since Bly had thought of going back to Yarborough. By the time he had had enough money he was no longer interested. Or thought he wasn't, until he saw her picture in the paper this morning.

An old picture from the files? Or was Tessie really the same after all these years? No photograph ever did her justice. There was nothing pretty about

the shape of her features or the shadows they cast, and that was all a camera could catch.

Her enchantment lay in life itself, which is motion—her swift step, her light breathing, the grace of her hands, the movement of intelligence in her eyes, the various inflections of her voice—and what else? Coloring? Say rather a sort of bloom or sheen that lay upon her. Instinctively she avoided all soiling of body and spirit. Or so he had thought until that night when he wondered if she could be the one who had tried to kill him.

Again Bly looked at the newspaper picture. A smudge of printer's ink on pulpy newspaper. Tessie, who should have been painted on ivory with a brush of gauze. He reread the caption: *Mrs. Llewellyn Vanbrugh of Yarborough*. But Tessie's married name had been Mrs. Geoffrey Vanbrugh. Llewellyn was her own maiden name. With a thrill of shock he realized what the change meant. She was divorced.

What a fine wavering hairline held the boundary between love and hate! Did he hate her now, as he hated the others? Was he going back simply to punish all four of them? Or to discover the truth about Tessie? How had she explained to the world Frank Bly's sudden absence

that next morning? Was he just another unsolved case of disappearance? An open file, gathering dust in the Missing Persons Bureau of the Yarborough Police Department?

He wouldn't stop at a hotel. He would do in Yarborough as he did in London or Rome, Marrakech or Peking—rent a comfortably furnished house and enter into the life of the place at his leisure.

He glanced at his watch. Dillon, clerk in the law firm that handled his affairs, should be at his desk by now. Bly put through a call:

"Dillon? . . . Longworth speaking. I want you to get hold of a real-estate agent in Yarborough, Pennsylvania, and find me a furnished house for the winter. Nothing big; just ten or fifteen rooms and an acre or so, on the east bank of the river outside the town. . . . No, I've never been there—I've just heard about it."

He frowned as he put down the telephone. Almost a slip, that. Frank Bly must remember that Stephen Longworth had never been in Yarborough.

There wouldn't be any of the usual pitfalls involved in the use of a false name. The initials *S. L.* were on all his belongings and it was habit to answer when anyone said "Steve" or "Mr. Longworth." He even signed

contracts as Stephen Longworth. All New York knew him under that name, including police and reporters. Outside Yarborough there was no one alive today who had known him as Frank Bly except a few oil prospectors in faraway Persia and his former chief in the OSS.

It was not his incognito alone that gave him confidence. In the last fifteen years he had learned to take care of himself. He smiled a little, remembering the starving Arab who tried to stab him in Mosul, the frightened little crook who tried to hold him up in Chicago, the Malay sailor who ran amok in Bangkok.

He crossed the living room to one of Marie Laurencin's wan, delicate portraits and swung the picture back on hinges, revealing a wall safe. Inside, in a shallow drawer, lay two guns—the revolver he had carried prospecting in Persia, the automatic he had used overseas during the war. A revolver is accurate and therefore merciful, but it is too big to be concealed. An automatic is inaccurate and therefore merciless, but it can be concealed in the hip pocket of an ordinary suit or even in the palm of the hand. To a crook this advantage outweighs the risk involved—an automatic may jam.

Bly was neither cop nor crook. Merely a potential murder victim. He could use either type of gun, in self-defense.

It was characteristic of the man that he chose the automatic. He had taken risks all his life. And he was not merciful to enemies . . .

After Bly's train left Philadelphia he looked up from his book. He wouldn't have been surprised to see some Yarborough faces. They were always running up to New York for a day or so of shopping. Covertly he studied the younger women. Had Tessie's daughter, little Nan, grown up to be like this or that? How old had she been that summer—five or six? She would be at least twenty now.

The woman in the seat beside him was middle-aged, short and stout with plump, small-boned hands squeezed into tight gloves. Aside from that she was dressed with elegance, all in black except for the brown of her mink scarf and the dark green of her *coq* feather turban. Though the smooth cheeks had a stuffed look, the black eyes sparkled.

Her eye caught his and she spoke pleasantly. "I beg your pardon, but is the next stop Yarborough?"

"Yes, it's the only stop between Philadelphia and Wilmington."

"Thank you. I should know because I live there. But I so rarely go to New York by train that I've forgotten. You know Yarborough?"

"Only by hearsay." He smiled. "A typical small town."

"A small city," she corrected him gently. "There's a difference."

He laughed. "What difference? There may be more money in Yarborough than in a small town, but I've been told it's as provincial."

"Who told you?"

Some perverse imp tempted him. Why not launch his campaign here and now with a piece of calculated audacity? It was quite possible the gist of this conversation might be repeated to Tessie or to one of her friends. Yarborough was a place where gossip traveled faster than sound.

Bly answered, "A fellow I met in Cairo during the war. Some years before that he had worked in Yarborough as a boatman for some people named Vanbush or Vanbrugh. His name was Frank Bly."

She must have blanched, for suddenly her lipstick looked artificial, a smear of red grease caking slack lips. Her eyes were shocked, incredulous. She

spoke in a whisper: "But that's impossible!"

"What do you mean?" He was as bewildered as she.

"You can't have met Frank Bly during the war. Not the Frank Bly who used to be the Vanbrugh's boatman."

"Why not?"

She swallowed and her full throat quivered. "Because—fifteen years ago Frank Bly was—murdered."

Later that afternoon, after Bly had been driven out to the modern house which was to be his temporary home in Yarborough, he kept returning to that remark. He scarcely listened as the real-estate agent, Mrs. Quinn, pointed out the splendid view of the river. He was wondering if he should have questioned that woman on the train. At the moment it had seemed prudent strategy to murmur, "Oh, really? Then I must have mistaken the name. It couldn't have been Frank Bly I knew in Cairo."

But even now he could not quite repress a shiver. It had been too much like reading your own obituary in the morning paper. Or dreaming that you are in a graveyard, stumbling over a tombstone marked with your own name.

Should he go to the police or the *Yarborough Chronicle* to

get details of "the Bly case," as it was probably called? No, there would be photographs. Police and newspapermen are trained to recognize faces from photographs. Aside from them, his incognito was safer than he had expected. The layman, who sincerely believed Frank Bly was dead, would be almost incapable psychologically of recognizing him in a living man, Stephen Longworth.

"—and the cedar closet is upstairs at the end of the hall, and—"

Smiling, Bly interrupted Mrs. Quinn: "Wasn't there a murder in this neighborhood years ago?"

"Not in this house!" Her face looked like a bulldog's if a bulldog were ever heavily rouged and powdered.

"But there was a murder near here?"

"I suppose you mean that boatman of the Vanbrugh's. The house is a good half mile down the road."

Bly forced the casual note into his voice. "Who was the murderer?"

"He was never caught."

"No question of accident? Or suicide?"

"N-no." Mrs. Quinn hesitated. "There were blows he couldn't have inflicted himself. And the police said nothing in the river could have made

wounds that shape. His body was in the water five weeks."

Bly felt that shiver of horror again. It might so easily have been his own body. "Who identified the dead man?"

"The Vanbrugh's, I suppose. They were the only people around here who really knew the man. I never saw him. I do hope this old story doesn't worry you, Mr. Longworth. After all, it happened years ago. Probably when you were a child. That gray hair doesn't deceive me!"

She prattled on until he managed to get rid of her.

Alone, he lingered on the terrace as twilight silvered sky and water. How often he had gone to sleep in his bunk at the Vanbrugh's boathouse with this same sound in his ears—the ceaseless splash and ripple of the river's swift current.

Whose murdered body had been dragged out of that current fifteen years ago? And why was it identified as Frank Bly?

He had been such an ordinary boy, his father the postmaster in a small Pennsylvania town, his mother the daughter of a bank cashier in the same town. There he had lived all his life until both parents died. After that first winter alone, working days and taking courses at night, he had

drifted south to Yarborough, hoping for a summer job in the peach orchards, and finding a better job as boatman.

Not the sort of boy who gets himself murdered. Yet someone had tried to kill him, and later another victim had been buried under his name . . .

The first meeting after his return to Yarborough came sooner than he had hoped. It was at a Field-Club dance for the Community Chest. Bly stood in the archway to the ballroom watching the dancers, particularly a tall girl in flaring white taffeta.

Mrs. Quinn sidled up to Bly. "Charming, isn't she? Her name is Nancy Vanbrugh."

Little Nan. He had forgotten that her eyes were tawny, the color of brown sherry by firelight. He had forgotten that her hair was a more golden brown. He did remember the thick golden lashes and the heavy eyelids that gave her such a sleepy look.

They were dancing when she said, "I hear you've been in Persia, Mr. Longworth."

How impersonal! What would she do if he said, "Nan, don't you remember? I'm Frank, the boy at the boat-house. You once said you were going to marry me when you grew up."

Instead he answered, "I was there for three years."

"I'd like to hear more about it."

"You shall."

A boy her own age cut in. She smiled at Bly over her shoulder as she drifted away.

He got his hat and gloves and drove home, deeply disturbed. He hadn't thought much about Nan in the last few years. He had no reason to suspect her as he suspected the others. No child of five could have struck those blows. What would happen to Nan when he did discover the one who had struck him, unseen, in the darkness? Vanbrugh was her father; Tessie, her mother.

Two days later, walking through the woods, he was caught in a cloudburst. He had turned back toward the house when he met Nan, riding a big-boned roan. Leather and tweed and whipcord protected her body, but her fair hair was dark with rain.

"It's only a step to my house, Miss Vanbrugh. My housekeeper will give you hot tea and rum."

"I'd love that." She smiled. "Most people call me Nan."

They sat on a bearskin rug in front of a roaring fire while the housekeeper brought hot buttered biscuits and strawberry jam with the tea and rum.

Outside, rain lashed against the window.

Nan laughed. "Wonderful! It never rained enough in Arizona to make you appreciate the sunshine. It was like a painted face that never changes color."

"You were there a long time?"

"Ten years. Boarding school. Eight to eighteen. Then college. I haven't been home much."

"If you'd been my daughter I wouldn't have sent you away."

"There were reasons. My parents were divorced. And now I want to hear all about Cairo."

"Cairo?" He hadn't mentioned Cairo to anyone except the woman on the train.

"Someone said you'd been there, too."

"Who?"

"I'm afraid I don't recall." Her eyes slid away from his toward the fire.

He looked at her somberly. She was the one weak place in the Vanbrugh armor. From her he might wring all sorts of artless admissions. Only he didn't want to. Suddenly he realized she was the weak place in his armor, too. He wouldn't mind hurting the others. But he couldn't hurt them now without hurting Nan . . .

That night after dinner he lingered on the terrace while

the moon rose, turning the riverbank into a badly-developed photograph of itself.

There had been no moon that other night fifteen years ago. For a long time he had had nightmares about that horror. Now, deliberately, he forced himself to relive it in the waking state.

There had been no intimation of evil then, before darkness fell. Bly had only to close his eyes now and he could still see Tessie Vanbrugh as she had looked that afternoon on the sunlit terrace when the packing case arrived. Her hair was a light brown, straight and long, parted in the middle, coiled on her neck. It had the texture and glitter of the finest silk.

Excitement had brought a faint pink into her cheeks delicate as an apple blossom, but the skin at temple and throat was white, laced with violet veins. She had linked arms with her guest, Denise de Beaupré, a small quiet girl from France, dark and sweet as a black cherry.

"Be careful, Frank!" Tessie's voice sang like a taut wire when his ax struck at the heavy timber. "There's an inlaid cabinet inside. It's more than valuable. Unique."

When he wrenched the last plank away he saw pads and

rolls of old newspaper stuffed with excelsior lashed to the cabinet with twine, to cushion it against the inside of the case when it was moved. His penknife hacked at the twine. He heard Denise catch her breath. It was almost a cry of pain. "Oh . . ."

"I'll be careful, Miss de Beaupré," he tried to reassure her. But when the last of the padding had fallen away he couldn't help wondering what all the fuss was about.

It was just an oblong chest, standing on four sturdy carved legs held together with a stretcher. The dropleaf front was a solid slab of dark wood inlaid with paler wood in a pattern of flowers. To Frank they were dull as dead flowers, dried and pressed between the leaves of a book, and they had the same look of flat, faded fragility.

It was then that Geoffrey Vanbrugh came out on the terrace with his neighbor, Dick Strawn. Vanbrugh was the larger man with the deeper voice, almost a handsome man, with his warm, brown eyes and the small beard that he wore because he was an artist and liked to be different from other men.

His eyes glowed as he saw the cabinet. "Denise, are you sure you want to sell? After all,

it was your father's and it's perfect."

Denise smiled. "You forget I'm a French teacher with nothing but my salary. I'd much rather have the money."

"Then that's settled." Vanbrugh took Tessie's hand. "Your birthday present, dear."

The apple blossom turned to rose. "Oh, Geoff! I had no idea you were going to buy it!"

Vanbrugh turned to Bly. "Let's move it into the living room, Frank. It's pretty heavy and we must be careful."

"A music cabinet!" Tessie was ecstatic. "For all that sheet music we've been keeping on top of the piano."

"I'll get it." Denise hurried to the piano at the far end of the long room.

Tessie knelt before the cabinet, pulled down the drop leaf. "What's this?" She was looking at a flat parcel of newspaper.

Vanbrugh unwrapped it. "The key. Hand-wrought iron. The packers must have wrapped it in paper to keep it from scratching the wood."

"I don't want a huge key like that sticking out and catching my dress every time I pass the cabinet!" said Tessie. "I shall leave it just where it is, in the paper, so it won't scratch anything."

She pushed the parcel to the

back of the shelf and began piling record albums in front of it.

Bly went back to the terrace. Strawn was sitting on the coping.

Bly began to put the loose boards and old newspapers inside the shell of the packing case. "Is that cabinet really valuable, Mr. Strawn?"

"Yes, Frank."

"You're sure?"

"It's my business to be sure. You know I'm an art dealer."

"I didn't know. Say, these old newspapers are French."

"You'd expect French packers to use French newspapers for packing, wouldn't you?"

"But these are dated ten years ago!"

"Naturally. The cabinet has been in storage in Paris ever since Miss de Beaupré's father died in 1924."

"Will it be all right if I take the packing case down to the boathouse? I promised little Nan I'd make her a doll's house, and this is just the thing for it."

"I'm sure nobody wants the case."

"All right if I take the papers, too? I studied French last winter at night school."

"Of course."

Vanbrugh came out on the terrace. "Better tune up the cabin cruiser, Frank. We're going on the river."

As Bly turned away he heard Vanbrugh say, "What are you waiting out here for, Dick? Your commission?"

Strawn laughed. "Partly. I don't like to talk money in front of women. Did I tell you Denise wanted half in cash? So she can start a checking account and draw on it immediately without waiting for a check to clear."

"Yes."

It was nearly dark when they brought the cruiser back to the boathouse, where Bly had spent the rest of the afternoon working on Nan's dollhouse. Strawn and Vanbrugh came out of the men's locker room looking worried. Vanbrugh spoke to Bly. "Please come up to my study as soon as the boat is shipshape."

In the study Vanbrugh did most of the talking. He was quiet and pleasant about the whole thing. So was Strawn. It was Bly who became shaken and shrill.

"Mr. Strawn tells me he left five thousand dollars in cash in the men's locker room this afternoon, Frank. Fifty new one-hundred-dollar bills, fresh from the bank. He couldn't take it with him on the river because he was wearing only his bathing suit. Just now, when he went into the locker room, the money was gone."

"But, Mr. Vanbrugh, I don't know anything about it! I didn't know there was money in that room. I haven't been there since yesterday."

Vanbrugh's friendly brown eyes were more troubled than angry. "I'd much rather you told me the truth, Frank. You know I wouldn't prosecute."

"Neither would I," put in Strawn. "I just want the money back. I'm not a rich man and five thousand—well, it's five thousand!"

"Maybe a tramp—" faltered Bly.

"How could a tramp get into the boathouse this afternoon without your hearing him? You were there all the time."

"I took the money out of my wallet and wrapped it in paper so nobody would suspect what it was," added Strawn. "Colored paper from an old candy box, lilac and silver."

Vanbrugh went on more vehemently. "You know, Frank, you were practically a tramp yourself when you wandered into Yarborough."

Strawn intervened. "Don't be hard on the boy, Geoff. I was a fool to leave such a sum in an unlocked place. I was just throwing temptation in his way."

"All right." Vanbrugh dropped his voice. "See here, Frank; if you'll give back the

money and clear out tonight I won't say anything about it to anyone. Neither will Mr. Strawn. But if you don't do that I shall be forced to call the police."

"But how can I if I haven't got the money?"

There was a heavy silence. Strawn stood leaning against a bookcase, studying lines in the palm of his hand. Vanbrugh sat behind his desk, gaze level, accusing, sure of Bly's guilt, waiting for him to break down.

He broke, but not the way Vanbrugh expected. "What am I going to do?" he sobbed. "I didn't take the money! I don't know anything about it!" He crouched over a chair, shoulders heaving.

Strawn laid a hand on the back of Vanbrugh's chair and leaned down, speaking so softly that Bly couldn't hear what he said. Vanbrugh rose and left Strawn, put a kindly hand on Bly's shoulder.

"Sorry, Frank. Afraid I lost my temper. Take a night to sleep on this, and if the money's back in the locker room tomorrow morning we won't say anything more about it." The firm hand gave Bly's shoulder a little apologetic shake.

"Thanks." Bly struggled to his feet and made for the French door, almost running.

"See you in the morning." He stumbled out the door and hurried down the path through the woods to the boathouse. They had both been damned decent, he thought. Most men would have called the police the moment they discovered the money gone, without warning the man they suspected. But they were all such decent people—the Vanbrughs and Strawn and Denise de Beaupré—the very nicest people Bly had ever known.

He did not look back when he heard the footsteps behind him. He knew it was one of the four, for no one else used that path. There wasn't another house within twenty miles of the Vanbrughs' home and Strawn's bungalow in those days. The Vanbrughs kept only one servant, an old cook. Bly would have recognized her step by the creak of her shoes. Strawn had no servant. And it wouldn't be Nan. She was always in bed by six.

Bly didn't look back because he wanted to be alone to think things out for himself. If he could get to his bunk in the boathouse and snap off the lights, not one of the four would disturb his apparent sleep. They were considerate in all the obvious ways. If they failed in the less obvious ways that was just because they

could not think of him as one of themselves.

Perhaps he wouldn't have cared if he had not fallen under the spell of Tessie Vanbrugh's beauty. It was pain to wonder if, under all her careful kindness, she thought him a stupid, loutish boy who would never be anything but a boatsman. Couldn't she see that this summer was an economic accident? Something that had nothing to do with the real Frank Bly?

He stopped at the edge of the pier. He no longer heard footsteps behind him. No one was following him. It must have been the echo of his own footsteps. He could stand here and smoke a cigarette before he turned into the boathouse.

Two miles across the water he could see the lights shimmering along the opposite shore. The current was running fiercely, slapping the piles of the pier. The wind was brisk. He cupped the match flame in his hands and bent his head to it.

That saved his life. The first smashing blow glanced off his head instead of crushing his skull. The jar threw him off balance. With man's ancient instinct both hands went out, clawing wildly for the branch that wasn't there. His feet slipped. There was a great

splash, and then the shock of cold water.

He came up to the surface with a shuddering gasp. He couldn't see. Something sticky gummed his eyelids, trickled down to his lips. From its taste and consistency he knew it was blood.

Arms threshing wildly, his one hand caught a pile of the pier and clung. He got the other hand on the same pile, braced his knees against it, and inched his way up. At last his hand could grope for the edge of the pier above.

He found it and gripped, panting. Another blow crashed, and he heard the bones of his fingers snap. Dazed, he thought, "This is murder."

He couldn't see above the edge of the pier. He couldn't hang on. One hand was crippled, the other slipping. A second fainter splash, and the cold water revived him a little.

He was a good swimmer. He gave himself to the river, hardly making a sound that could be heard above the rushing water, just paddling enough to keep himself moving, head below the surface. The current was taking him. He had a chance of reaching the opposite shore a mile farther downstream. A fighting chance . . .

He waited a long time before he let the water break over his

face and looked back at the shore he had left. He could see the Vanbrugh house on top of the hill, lights shining from every window. Hill and trees, boathouse and pier were all one mass of darkness against the faintly luminous sky.

He could not see a human figure. He could not see anything moving. But sound carries far across water, and it was silent out there in midstream, where the river met no obstacles. Now he heard a faraway sound—footsteps ringing hollow on the planks of the pier dwindling as they receded up the path through the woods toward the house.

It was one of them. One of those four decent, considerate people whom he had trusted, the nicest people he had ever known. Their charm, their sensitive gentleness was on the surface—illusion. The secret reality was ugly, desperate, violent.

In some way he didn't understand he had drawn that violence on himself. Somehow, his very existence must threaten one of them without his knowing it. But which one? And how?

It would be his word against theirs. He had no evidence. He hadn't seen who had struck those two blows. Even if he had, who would believe him? In

Yarborough they were all known and respected, and he was not. They had money. He had nothing but the shirt and jeans and sneakers he was wearing and a few dollars in his wallet at the boathouse. Police would be impressed by their testimony. A countercharge of attempted murder without supporting evidence would seem like a foolish boy's wild effort to revenge himself.

So he couldn't go back now. But... His young jaw hardened. Someday he would go back. Someday...

On the terrace a soft footfall slithered over flagstones, and jerked him back to the present. The housekeeper was a shadow among shadows, gaunt in black. "Mr. Longworth, the telephone. Mrs. Vanbrugh."

As he crossed the living room his knees turned to water. Tessie...

The wonderful, clear, light voice was the same. "Mr. Longworth? I called to thank you for taking such good care of my little girl this afternoon. We should be so happy if you would dine with us tomorrow. I hope this isn't too short notice?"

A voice like pigeons' cooing. A shimmer in the tone like the iridescence of pigeons' plumage.

His own voice sounded harsh

by contrast. "Not at all. I shall be delighted."

Back on the terrace, he looked again at the lights along the other shore.

Some day...

This was it...

The Vanbrugh living room seemed smaller than he remembered it. Everywhere he saw evidence of economic erosion: the neat darn in the faded chintz slipcover, the bald spot in the Mohammedan prayer rug, silver unevenly polished. Fortune had stood still here while time moved on.

Tessie or Nan had done all that could be done to make the room festive for this evening. Long-stemmed red roses in a great bowl of cut crystal. A brisk wood fire on the hearth that brought a blush to the yellowed white woodwork. But these touches were falsely gay, rouge on an old worn face.

The inlaid cabinet was still standing where Bly and Vanbrugh had placed it that last morning fifteen years ago. Bly glanced at it almost resentfully, with an obscure feeling that somehow it had been the starting point of all the trouble.

A man in well-worn tweeds was dozing in a wing chair before the hearth. His hair was brown, but his small beard was a badger mixture of brown and gray. He rose. "I didn't hear

you come in. I'm waiting for Tessie. I'm her former husband, Geoffrey Vanbrugh."

"And I'm Stephen Longworth." Bly searched the warm brown eyes for a flicker of recognition. There was none.

From the stair outside came the sound of a footfall. How well Bly remembered that light swift foot that seemed to fall on his heart in the old days. He turned toward the portières. He thought wildly that this was another guest. Not Tessie. Then the ravaged face smiled, and he saw Tessie's ghost among the ruins of her beauty.

She was as wasted as one of the Fates, a haggard old woman in a dress filmy and gray as smoke, which brought out the leaden tones in her parched skin and dull hair. The bloom, the sheen, the glow, so long remembered, were gone with the sunshine of that last summer. All that remained was the buoyant step, the lilting voice, the lightly drawn breath that now seemed to animate a dying woman. Had time alone done all this to Tessie?

"Why, Geoff!" She gave Vanbrugh both hands, but there was pain in her eyes. "I had no idea you were here!"

"I was leaving Key West for New York when I got your telegram. I came here instead." He was looking at her with the

same eager light in his eyes. Bly thought, He still loves her.

"If you're giving a party tonight—" he began.

"You'll join us!" she interrupted. "Not a party. Just the Strawns and Mr. Longworth."

*The Strawns.* So Dick Strawn had married some other woman. Had he ever cared for Tessie? After all, there was no evidence he had, except Bly's own jealous imagination.

The doorbell rang. Bly saw Strawn through the portières, in the hall, handing hat and gloves to the maid. His hair was a little thinner, his figure a little thicker, but he still wore that look of world-weary resignation. He came into the room with the woman Bly had met on the train.

Hatless now, her hair was satiny black stitched sparingly with silver. Black lace draped cunningly hid the absence of waistline. Jewels brought out the vital spark in her dark eyes. She tottered across the waxed floor on plump feet squeezed into tiny black slippers.

Tessie was saying, "Mr. Longworth, Mrs. Strawn."

"We've met before. On the train, wasn't it?" There was a ring in her voice like the clashing of swords. "You startled me by saying you had met Frank Bly in Cairo. I was so relieved when you admitted

you might have mistaken the name. I'm like Madame du Deffand: I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them."

Strawn kissed Tessie's withered hand. "My dear... Hello, Geoff; what a pleasant surprise!... Mr. Longworth..." Either Strawn believed he was meeting a stranger for the first time or he was a better actor than Bly had ever suspected.

Nan came into the room with a whisper of taffeta. "Why, Father!" She ran to kiss Vanbrugh. "Mother, you didn't tell me he was coming!"

"I didn't know it, myself." Tessie looked gratefully at the maid, who chose that moment to announce dinner...

Afterward, in the living room again, Tessie sat in the wing chair pouring coffee. Vanbrugh was on the sofa facing the fire, Mrs. Strawn on his left, Nan on his right. Strawn sat on a hassock close to Tessie. Bly stood, with one hand on the mantelpiece, looking down into the fire. His moment had come. But he waited until the maid left them. Conversation was flagging. That made it easy for him to introduce a new subject.

His voice was idly curious as he went on: "—and, speaking of murder, I wonder who really did kill Frank Bly."

There was a startled hush. He might have dropped a lighted match or upset a glass of brandy.

Vanbrugh spoke slowly: "Fifteen years is a long time. We'll never know."

Bly kept his voice level. He must speak like Stephen Longworth, a stranger casually interested, tactless enough to force the subject on people who had been close to it. "I've gathered that the murderer was never caught. That whets my curiosity. Just who was this Frank Bly? And what actually happened to him? Some of you were witnesses, weren't you?"

"I doubt if we remember details now," said Tessie carefully. "Freud would say we'd forgotten because we didn't want to remember. It was unpleasant. Especially for Nan."

"Oh..." Stephen Longworth must show belated embarrassment at this point while Frank Bly watched every face. "I'm sorry. If any of you would rather not discuss it—?" The note of challenge implied a different wording: *If any of you are afraid to discuss it.*

Strawn was quick to scotch the unspoken suspicion. "Why shouldn't we? Nan is grown up now. It doesn't bother you any longer, does it, my dear?"

"Oh, no." But the face Nan

turned toward Bly was wan. "I was ill afterward. They had a psychiatrist. And then they sent me away to boarding school and college. I used to have nightmares. But I've outgrown that."

Tessie made a little gesture of dismay. "Why can't we just forget?"

"I wonder if he forgets?" There was awe in Nan's voice.

Bly looked at her sharply. Could she have seen or heard something when she was only five? Something never revealed? That would explain the psychiatrist and the nightmares.

"He? Who?" demanded Mrs. Strawn.

"The murderer, whoever he was. Imagine living for fifteen years with—that."

Strawn smiled sardonically. "It has happened, Nan."

"You're horrid and cynical, Dick," Nan said. "Sometimes I really don't see how you put up with him, Denise!"

"Denise?" faltered Bly.

"Mrs. Strawn," explained Nan.

"I was born a Frenchwoman, Mr. Longworth. Denise de Beaupré. I first came to Yarborough as a French teacher at one of the schools here."

"Oh." He had been so sure these four would not recognize him. Yet, illogically, it had not occurred to him that he might

fail to recognize one of them. Denise had been so different then. Slender and dark, quiet and sweet, the one who smiled and watched and listened while the other three talked.

Now he had a flash of intuition that events were moving too fast to be quite spontaneous. It could not be chance that all the principal actors in the old drama were brought together again so soon after he reached Yarborough.

Which one of them had planned this dinner tonight? Denise, who was so startled at his casual mention of Frank Bly on the train? Nan, who had ridden toward his house yesterday, perhaps hoping to meet him? Tessie, who had recently telegraphed Vanbrugh, possibly asking him to return? Or Strawn, who had kept himself in the background?

It was to Strawn that Bly turned now. "You haven't answered my question. Who was Frank Bly? An old friend?"

"Well, Geoff?" Strawn looked at Vanbrugh quizzically. "You hired him."

Vanbrugh turned a musing glance on the fire. "I first met Frank Bly one rainy evening in June in a wayside diner. He was on the seat beside me, and he pitched forward in a dead faint. He was starving. I offered him a job for the summer looking

after the cabin cruiser I had then, and he jumped at it."

"You should have handed him a ten-dollar bill and wished him luck," remarked Strawn.

"If only you had!" Denise spoke bitterly. "Think what we would have been spared!"

"But I would have lain awake nights wondering what happened to him after the ten-dollar bill was gone," objected Vanbrugh. "So, instead, I brought him home that night in my car."

"I remember," Tessie sighed. "I came to the front door when I heard Geoff's car. The boy was still hungry. I took him into the kitchen and gave him bread and ham."

"And a can of beans," Frank Bly had let the words slip. Now Stephen Longworth added swiftly. "Isn't that standard for starving men—a can of beans?"

"Possibly." Tessie seemed to dislike the flippant tone. "I don't recall giving him beans."

"I took him down to the boathouse with blankets and towels," went on Vanbrugh. "There was a sort of guest house on the upper floor. A big room with three bunks, a shower, and a kitchenette. I paid him seventy-five a month. He saved nearly all of it."

"You were soft, both of you," said Strawn. "And see what happened? Just what you

might have expected. You got into the worst trouble of your lives through Frank Bly. Good heavens, Tessie, have you forgotten? Geoff was nearly arrested for his murder! And we still don't know what really happened.

"What did we know about Bly? Nothing—except what he chose to tell us. All that stuff about losing his parents and trying to earn enough money to go to college may have been a pack of lies. He may have been what we call a juvenile delinquent nowadays, a hopeless drifter, and unemployable with a criminal record. When you took that wretched boy into your home you took mystery and violence into your lives."

"Now, Dick," Denise rebuked him gently. "Whatever happened was not Frank Bly's fault. After all, he was the one who suffered most. He was killed."

"People who get murdered always do something to provoke it," retorted Strawn. "If not something vicious, then something imprudent."

Words almost welled to Bly's lips. "But I didn't do anything to provoke it—anything!"

Strawn was turning to him for support. "You agree, Longworth?"

Bly smiled wryly. "Do

murder victims think so?"

Strawn laughed. "No one knows what they think, once they become victims!"

Bly stifled an impulse to respond, "I'm the one man in the world who does know—a murder victim investigating his own murder." Instead, he spoke as Longworth. "Where was Bly killed?"

Vanbrugh answered, "On the pier, outside our boathouse."

"And when?"

Strawn answered this time. "We don't know the hour, but it must have been the night after the money disappeared."

Tessie had gasped aloud. Denise's eyes had narrowed. But it was Nan who looked from Strawn to her father in surprise and cried out, "The money?"

Vanbrugh was taken aback. "Dick, I've never told anyone else about that. Not even Tessie or Nan."

Strawn looked at Bly. "That was a slip of the tongue, Longworth. The business about the money has been a secret between Vanbrugh and me all these years. But since I did mention it, I see no harm in explaining now. It can't hurt anyone after so long. The truth is that Frank Bly was a thief."

"I don't believe it!" Tessie's voice fluttered, the sound of wings when a bird spies a cat

stalking its nest. "And I'd rather talk about something else."

Denise spoke crisply. "I agree. After all, there's nothing any of us can do or say now that will bring Frank Bly back to life!"

"No, Denise; no, Tessie." Strawn looked from one woman to the other. "Now we've started this, we're going to finish it. Otherwise, Mr. Longworth may think we're afraid of the truth. Longworth, you see that inlaid cabinet at the other end of the room?"

"I've been admiring it all evening."

"Shortly before Frank Bly was murdered, Denise learned that I was an art dealer as well as the Vanbrugh's only neighbor. She was their house guest at the time. She showed me a photograph of the cabinet. It was in storage then, in a Paris warehouse with the rest of her family furniture, and she wanted to sell it. Acting as her agent, I sold it to Vanbrugh for ten thousand dollars."

"More than I could afford, even then," put in Vanbrugh. "But—well, look at it, Longworth, and you'll understand why I had to have it. It's a true Sixteenth Century inlay, the kind that preceded marquetry. The kind that looks like embroidery instead of painting."

When it was first made, the inlaid ivory and fruitwood were stained in vivid Christmas colors—red, green, and white—and it must have been as blithe as Botticelli's *Primavera*. Though the colors have faded, even now you can see the lyrical Renaissance gaiety of the springy lines."

"The cabinet arrived here by barge from Philadelphia," Strawn went on. "One Saturday afternoon, a few hours before Bly disappeared."

"How well I recall that day!" put in Denise. "I was so embarrassed, because the packing case was addressed to 'Mrs. Richard Strawn.' When I wrote my father's lawyer asking him to send me the cabinet, I mentioned that I had just become engaged to Dick. Somehow, he got the idea that we were already married."

"As if it mattered!" Strawn looked at her fondly, then turned back to Bly. "To seal the bargain, Vanbrugh had drawn half the amount in cash from his bank that morning."

"I needed that cash," Denise smiled reminiscently. "I wanted to open charge accounts in several dress shops so I could start buying my trousseau. For that you need a bank's reference. And I didn't want to wait even the short time it takes to clear a deposited check."

Strawn continued, "As soon as Vanbrugh verified Denise's claim that the cabinet was in good condition, he handed the money to me as Denise's agent. The day was hot. Tessie suggested a cruise and swim in the river. I couldn't take the money with me—we were all in bathing suits. And the bank was closed Saturday afternoon. So I left the money in the men's locker room at the boathouse, wrapped in some colored paper I found there. You can guess the rest, Longworth. When we came back from our cruise that package of money was gone."

Denise was aghast. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Or me?" Tessie looked at Vanbrugh tragically.

"My dear, we were trying to spare you both a rather unpleasant shock," said Vanbrugh. "We talked it over with Bly in my study privately."

"How naïve we were!" Denise smiled ruefully at Tessie. "Do you remember sitting in this room together with cocktails and wondering why the men didn't come out of the study?"

"Yes, and I recall hearing voices, though I couldn't catch the words."

"They were still at it when you went upstairs to kiss Nan good night," added Denise. "I stood at the window watching

the clouds over the river. I could see the upper floor of the boathouse above the trees, and I noticed there were no lights. I wondered where Frank Bly was, but it didn't occur to me he was in the study."

"Of course, Bly was the obvious suspect," said Strawn. "When we went out on the river he stayed behind at the boathouse. But we wanted to give him a chance to make restitution before we called the police."

"It was ghastly," Vanbrugh sighed. "I'll never forget it."

*You'll never forget it!* Bly smiled grimly, and said aloud, "I suppose this Bly denied everything?"

"Of course." Vanbrugh drew a long breath.

"Then you both assumed his guilt without any evidence at all, just because he was the most likely person!" Nan was shocked.

"Nan, who else could it have been?" protested Vanbrugh. "Every one of us had an interest in the orderly completion of the transaction, except Bly. Dick wanted his commission, your mother and I wanted the cabinet, and Denise wanted the money. There was no one else but Agatha, our cook, and you know that motherly old soul wouldn't be tempted by money. She had all

the comforts she wanted. She had no vices and no relatives to prey on her.

"So we gave Bly until morning to return the money. He left the study by a French door, lifting his hand and saying, 'See you tomorrow.' Standing by my desk, I could see him through the window as he walked across the lawn and took the path through the woods to the boathouse. I never saw him again. He simply walked out of our lives, and his last words were a lie: 'See you tomorrow.'"

Strawn nodded. "I said, 'I need a drink. Any liquor in the dining room?' You said, 'Yes. I'll join you in a minute.' But you were a long time coming, I was on my third drink when you drifted in."

"I needed time to think."

To think? Bly's smile curved skeptically. So it really could have been any one of them. Each had been alone when Bly heard the footsteps behind him on the path. Vanbrugh, ostensibly in the study; Strawn, ostensibly in the dining room; Denise, ostensibly in this living room. And Tessie? Had anyone ever thought to ask Nan just when her mother came to kiss her good night that evening or how long her mother had stayed?

"I remember that next

morning," resumed Vanbrugh. "A sunny day with a sky blue and white as a della Robbia plaque. I went down to the boathouse early, hoping Bly had put the money back in the locker room. It wasn't there, and neither was Bly. He had left everything, even his own wallet and money. The earth on the pathway was still moist from the night's rain, but there were no footprints. It was inexplicable and frightening, like a horror story."

"Seemed obvious to me," amended Strawn. "He had gone before the rain and taken our money with him."

Bly scowled at Strawn. "So you reported the theft to the police then?"

Vanbrugh answered for Strawn. "No, we didn't."

"Why not?"

"Tessie believed the boy had drowned during the storm, because she didn't know about the missing money. When I saw how hysterical she was about his death I knew she couldn't stand his arrest for larceny."

"So?" Bly prompted them.

Strawn laughed. "What would you expect of anyone as quixotic as Geoff? He sold some life insurance and gave me four thousand to pay Denise. The least I could do was to waive my commission."

Denise made a comic face.

"Then, Geoff, I owe you four thousand."

"Nonsense!" responded Vanbrugh. "I got the cabinet, and it's worth more today than all I paid for it."

"Who found Bly's body?" demanded Bly.

A small voice spoke from the sofa. "I did."

Bly was astonished. "Nan! You?"

Tessie leaned forward, pain in her eyes again. "Nan, dear, I'm sure Mr. Longworth will excuse you."

"He needn't." Nan tossed her shining hair. "It's all so long ago it doesn't upset me now. I was five and a half, going on six. Mother and Father and Denise had gone to a luncheon party Dick was giving at his bungalow down the road, to introduce Denise to his family. Agatha was in the kitchen and I was supposed to play within sight of her window. I soon realized she wasn't paying attention to me. I slipped down the path to the boathouse.

"It was autumn, hot as summer but drier. All the leaves had turned scarlet or yellow, lovely transparent colors that took the sun like stained glass. I felt wonderfully free in the sunlit stillness.

"I took off my shoes and stockings and sat on the pier dangling my feet in the cold

water. Then I saw a water spider trying to climb the pile under the pier. I got a stick and leaned over to tickle the insect, and then I saw it—him.

"He was face down, floating in the water under the pier. He was wearing a white shirt and blue jeans and sneakers. I poked at him with the stick. And then"—Nan caught her breath—"I knew he was dead.

"I was screaming when I ran into the kitchen still barefoot. Poor old Agatha thought I had hurt myself."

Tessie shuddered. "Nan was still sobbing when we got home. I remember her words to this day: '*Frank—under the boat-house—he's dead.*'"

"The body was in bad shape," said Vanbrugh. "But it seemed about Bly's weight and height and coloring. And he had been missing for five weeks, just about the time the body had been dead. So there could hardly be any doubt about the identification."

"Was the missing money in his pockets?" asked Bly.

"No." Vanbrugh admitted it uneasily.

Bly persisted. "Did you tell the police about the money then?"

Strawn shook his head. "It seemed wiser to volunteer as little information as possible. Nan was violently ill, the

money was gone, and Frank was dead. Geoff didn't want Tessie to know Frank had been a thief. I didn't see how the police could recover the money, for it must have fallen into the water. And then, that theft might have given the police the wrong idea. A quarrel over money that ended in a fist fight, one killing blow, and a body pushed into the water so it would pass for a drowning accident weeks later. That might have been the police case. As it was, they couldn't make a case against any of us. Total absence of motive will create a doubt in the mind of any jury."

"The whole thing will always be a complete mystery," concluded Vanbrugh. "Who took the money? And why? Who killed Frank? And why? There's no evidence, no clue, no motive, nothing. Just the money gone and the boy dead, by the hand of some unknown man or woman."

"Woman?" Bly repeated. "Could a woman have inflicted the wounds?"

"Oh, yes." It was Denise who answered. "The police doctor said they looked like hammer blows. It's the weight of a hammer that does the work, not the force of the arm that wields it. Anyone could have murdered Frank Bly, even a child."

Strawn spoke slowly. "If he was murdered."

Tessie gasped. "What do you mean? Suicide?"

Strawn's heavy lids veiled his glance, then he looked up, eyes slyly mocking. "Mind if I tell, Geoff?"

"I suppose not. But why?"

Strawn looked at Bly. "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone else except Geoff. I don't believe Frank Bly is dead."

Bly knew his self-control must crack in another moment. Had Strawn recognized him after all?

But Strawn's glance did not rest on Bly. It wandered from face to face and came to rest on Vanbrugh. "Because, four years later, that money was returned to me—anonimously."

Nan cried out, "Oh, Dick, that can't be! Even if Frank were alive he wouldn't return the money unless he took it!"

"Isn't it extremely possible he did take it?" retorted Strawn:

Bly recovered his voice. "How was the money returned?"

"By mail in fifty bills of one hundred dollars each," answered Strawn promptly. "I hadn't kept the numbers of the missing bills. I couldn't tell if these were identical, but the number of bills was significant.

It came to my office in a plain white envelope postmarked New York. Not even registered. Then I knew that Frank Bly was alive, that we two must have made a mistake in identifying the body as his. For no one knew about the missing money except Bly, Geoff and myself.

"I tried other theories. None of them worked. Would Bly's murderer take the money from Bly and then return it to me? No murderer would risk having the money traced back to him. Bly must have run away with the money as we first believed. Who the other man was, who murdered him and why—all that is a puzzle, something we'll never know. But I'm sure Bly went away as far as possible from the scene of his theft, so far that he himself didn't know he was listed as dead in the police records of Yarborough."

"Dick, no!" Nan's clenched knuckles were white on her knees. "Frank Bly wouldn't steal."

"My dear child, you were five years old when you knew him. How could you judge his character then?"

Bly changed the subject. "What became of the money then?"

"What do you suppose?" Strawn was bland. "I gave four thousand to Geoff and kept the

rest as my commission on the original transaction."

"And you two never told us." Denise glanced at her husband curiously. "I had no idea you were capable of such—reticence."

Tessie was looking at Vanbrugh. "It proves once more that people can live together for years without ever really knowing each other." Her tone was gentle, but Vanbrugh turned aside abruptly as if she had wounded his feelings.

Strawn defended himself stoutly. "There was nothing to tell. Just another mystery: Who was the dead man? Who killed him and why? And what did become of Frank Bly?"

Denise leaned back in her corner of the sofa, with the calculated art of a Parisian. She was smiling now, teeth even and white against the red lips. She spoke to Bly, her voice soft, faintly derisive. "Isn't it time you told us? Haven't you played with us long enough? What did become of you, Mr. Bly?"

Vanbrugh cried out, "Denise! What on earth—?"

Tessie spoke in a whisper. "Bly?"

Nan closed her lips tightly.

Strawn was looking hard at the stranger. "I've suspected it for the last fifteen minutes. That's why I decided to tell

about the return of the money. I didn't want you to think that we were suppressing any of the facts, Bly."

It was a relief to Bly. He stood silent, his back to the fire, facing their intent eyes, watching them as the stunning realization came to one after another.

"I am Frank Bly," he said quietly. "And I am very much alive."

Vanbrugh nodded slowly. "By heaven, you *could* be Bly at thirty-two, though the gray hair is confusing."

Tessie said, "I was so sure you were dead. Otherwise I would have known you."

Bly addressed Denise. "How did you guess? Or have you known all along?"

She was still smiling, enjoying her little triumph. "I suppose it was because I met you by chance on the train, without being told beforehand who you were supposed to be. The others met you only after a rather elaborate build-up about an entirely different personality—Stephen Longworth. Believing is seeing. They believed you were Longworth, so they didn't see you as Bly. And of course the physical change is great.

"On the train you looked vaguely, confusingly familiar to me. As we talked I tried to

visualize your face without gray hair at the temples, but I couldn't. Then you, yourself, gave me the association I needed. You dropped a sly hint that Frank Bly was still alive, and fifteen years dropped away from you. That's why I was so startled then. Until that moment I had honestly believed Frank Bly was dead."

"So you planned this dinner tonight to make sure?" suggested Bly.

"With Tessie's help, yes. I told her about our talk on the train, but I didn't mention my suspicion that you were Bly to her or to anyone else. Not even to my husband."

"I had no idea you were capable of such reticence." Strawn echoed her own words, with a smile.

Denise went on, "I soon discovered you were known as Stephen Longworth in Yarborough. That puzzled me. Isn't it illegal to pass under a false name?"

Bly shook his head. "Not a false name. A pen name. Stephen Longworth signs publishers' contracts and endorses their royalty checks. He is a real person. Perhaps more real than Frank Bly."

Strawn's ugly, intelligent face had settled into a stolid mold. "Longworth—or Bly—would it be indelicate to ask

you if you did take that money?"

"Most indelicate. You say yourself it was returned."

"By you?"

"I haven't admitted that I took it. Why should I return it if I hadn't?"

"Then"—Strawn's voice rang out with sudden vehemence—"just why have you come back?"

Slowly Bly looked from one tense face to another. "You really want to know? Most probably it's because one of you four nice people tried to murder me fifteen years ago, and I want to find out which one of you it was."

Strawn said, "Preposterous! You're accusing us?"

Vanbrugh said, "Really, Bly. How could someone attack you without your seeing who it was?"

"I was struck from behind, in the dark. Next thing I knew I was in the water. I couldn't see above the pier. When I got into midstream it was too dark to see anyone on the pier. Whoever it was tried to beat me back when I tried to climb out. My fingers were smashed. There are the scars."

He held out his right hand. "That was why I ran away. I barely escaped with my life and I was afraid to go back. You were hostile. You had charged

me with theft. How could I expect to make a counter-charge of attempted murder stick without evidence, without money to pay a lawyer?"

"But, Frank"—Vanbrugh was trying to sound reasonable—"even if you were attacked, why are you so sure it was one of us?"

"Who else could it have been? Who else used that path through the woods?"

They had no answer to this.

Bly went on in a level, dispassionate tone. "Now I have come back, I find that someone else actually was killed in that same place, about that same time. A man who was my height and weight, dressed like me. I don't know who he was. I don't know if he was killed because he was mistaken for me. Or if I was attacked because I was mistaken for him. Or whether someone had a motive for killing both of us, even though we were strangers to each other. I don't know if you made an honest mistake when you identified his body as mine, or if his identity was so incriminating to one of you that it had to be concealed at all costs.

"It's even possible that one of you deliberately drove me away with an accusation of theft and an attempt at violence so that his body could be

buried later under my name. But one of you must know the answers to all these questions. Because nothing you've said explains why one of you tried to murder me. And that I intend to find out."

Bly walked out of the room. No one spoke in the living room. He let himself out the front door and walked down the drive.

At the sound of a car he looked back. The Strawns were going home. Vanbrugh stood in the lighted doorway, watching.

Bly left the drive and started down the path through the woods to the boathouse.

The path looked as if it had not been used for years. Branches interlaced overhead, shutting out the stars. He felt his way through dead leaves that rustled at every step. After a while he heard the rustling of feet in the leaves behind him.

Again? He smiled tightly, waited, breathless. There was no further sound. Nerves? Memories?

He went on and turned a corner. The boathouse should have blocked his view; but there was the river, placid and silvery in the starlight. All that remained of the boathouse was a pile of charred timber. The pier still extended over the water, but several planks had rotted away.

A twig snapped. He spun around on his heel. Nan stood on the path, a wraith in shimmering white. "Frank! I'm so glad you're alive!"

She ran forward, soundless on pine needles. So that was why he had heard footfalls only on the upper part of the path tonight and that other night, fifteen years ago.

"Do you remember saying you were going to marry me when you grew up?"

Her laugh wavered. "Children are silly!"

"It wasn't silly. It was charming. You're the only one who has bothered to say you're glad I'm alive. Thank you, Nan."

She was standing close, eyes wide and bright. He bent his head and kissed her gently. For a moment her lips responded, warm and firm. Then she drew back, with a little catch in her breath. "You—you were in love with Mother long ago, weren't you?"

"Was I?" He shook his head doubtfully. "A lonely boy's daydream, Nan. I never told your mother or anyone else." His gaze shifted to the burned boathouse. "When did that happen?"

"A few days afterward. They said it was a short circuit." Again her eyes slid away from his. "I must go back. It's late."

"I'll go with you."

"No, please. I'd rather go alone."

Bly walked along the riverbank to his own home. The house was dark, but on the terrace one of the French doors was standing open. He stopped just outside.

Only the faintest light reached the room from the sky outside. It passed over a dark cloak, it edged a feathery crest of pale hair and lay gently along a clean jaw line.

He whispered, "Tessie."

She turned with fluid grace. "Why are you waiting outside?"

"I saw someone in the room. I didn't know who it was at first."

He pressed a switch. The lamp cast a softly shaded radiance, but now he could see the worn, hollow face. The cloak was not really dark. It was violet velvet held at her throat by an amethyst clasp. Even her smile was old, tired, wise, resigned. She said, "I can't believe this. I must look at you."

"I've changed."

"So have I. You know why I'm here?"

"No." To be alone with Tessie, to have her seek him out, ask his help, once his idea of pure heaven. And now, who said the middle years of life are always a parody of the youthful

dreams? Arabs had a bitter proverb: "Beware the curse of an answered prayer."

"You must know you once had the power to enchant me," he said. "Perhaps you thought you could use that power once more."

She rose. The cloak fell from her shoulders, lying in crushed folds about her feet, so flowery a color that he almost expected it to give off the fragrance of crushed violets. "That wasn't kind. You are mocking me." The smoky dress swirled about her ankles as she moved to face the wide unframed mirror over the mantelpiece. "Look in the mirror! Could that old woman ever charm any man again?"

"Mrs. Vanbrugh—"

"You called me Tessie a moment ago."

"You haven't really changed. Your spirit is the same."

"Valiantly spoken, Frank, and falsely."

"Tessie." The name slipped out again. "You have one thing on your side when you talk to me—memory. You and Geoffrey Vanbrugh were good to me when I had no other friends. In a way I loved you both. That may be why I became so bitter afterward when I was sure one of you had tried to kill me."

She leaned toward him impulsively. "But you were not killed. And now you're a

success. What have you to gain by raking over the cinders of an old crime?"

"Perhaps I hope I can prove that I was mistaken that you and Vanbrugh and the Strawns really are the kindly, pleasant, normal people you seem to be. Now we're alone, why don't you tell me what really happened and why? I might be satisfied with that."

"Oh, Frank!" It was a cry of anguish. "Can't you guess why I came here tonight? To ask you to go away and—forget. If you don't you'll hurt someone I love."

"Nan?"

"Of course not. She was a child then. I mean Geoff."

Bly weighed his next words. "I can't see how anything I do now can hurt Vanbrugh—unless he is the murderer."

Her voice dropped, softly as a dead leaf falls, so light the air can almost support it. "That's it, Frank. He is."

"Vanbrugh? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure." She shivered and hugged her knees as if she were cold, a schoolgirl gesture oddly appealing in one who looked so old and frail.

Tessie was speaking in a low, rapid voice. "It was the night after you disappeared. Denise and I didn't know about the accusation of theft. I thought you had drowned in the river.

Denise thought you had got into some scrape that made you ashamed to come back. That night Denise and Nan and Agatha all went to bed early, and Geoff had gone out to dinner to see some man in Yarborough about a portrait commission. I was alone in the living room, playing the piano and watching the moonlight on the river, when I saw a light in the boathouse.

"Then I thought Denise was right. I thought you were in such trouble you were afraid to come back openly, so you had come back secretly at night to get your money and books and clothes. But if you were in trouble I wanted to help. I thought of a gambling debt or a drunken party, nothing worse.

"I put on a dark cloak—this same cloak? Lyons velvet wears for years—and I went down to the boathouse. It was like a dream even then. Now it's vague as the memory of a dream. It was a lovely night, a fresh breeze on the water and the rippling sound of little waves. I wasn't wearing anything that would rustle. I don't believe I made a sound on the path."

"You always had the lightest step in the world, the most softly drawn breath," murmured Bly.

"I was wearing a dress

something like this that floated around me, and I had that feeling of drifting or flying that you have in some dreams. And it had all the inconsequence of a dream, for when I walked into the locker room I came face to face with a stranger."

"Tramp or burglar?"

"Oh, no, not a criminal type. An educated man. Subtle and clever and—evil. I never knew his name. I hardly saw his face. The light I'd seen was his flashlight. He turned it on me while he stood in darkness. He was about your height. I thought he was you until he spoke. I said, 'Frank, you're back!' He echoed me: 'Frank?' Then he said, 'Oh, the boatman. Were you fond of him?'

"His tone was nasty. I said, 'I shall telephone the police that someone has broken into our boathouse.' I was too angry to be frightened. But he didn't seem afraid of the police. He laughed and said, 'I'd like to talk to the police myself!'

"The boathouse extension was disconnected after you left. I ran up the path and lost my way in the woods. It must have been fifteen minutes before I reached the house. I was taking off my cloak in the hall when Geoff came in. I knew something dreadful had happened. His eyes were—what word can I use? Tortured. Yet I

knew the pain was not physical. The dream was turning into a nightmare. I was snatching at reality when I said, 'Geoff, there's a man in our boathouse, a stranger.'

"Geoff dismissed that in two bald sentences. 'Tessie, there is no man in the boathouse now. Forget that you saw him!' Then he went on in a dull, dead voice, speaking words I shall never forget. 'Tessie, if anyone should ever ask you where I was this evening, you are to make just one answer. You are to say that I was here with you all the time.'

"I was lucky. No one ever asked me where Geoff had been that evening. For when the body was found everyone assumed that it was your body, and you were supposed to have been killed when you disappeared." Tessie's arms dropped from her knees and hung loosely at her sides, as if she were exhausted.

"Was this why you divorced Vanbrugh? Even though he is Nan's father?"

"I divorced Geoff because he is Nan's father." Her breast moved as if she were sighing, but he could not hear that gentle breath. "Can you imagine what it was like? Living with a man you knew to be a murderer and never a word about it spoken between you?

That's Geoff's way. He never spoke of unpleasant things. He's sensitive and reserved. An artist.

"I knew that if I did ask him he would deny the whole thing. He would think that the less I knew about that horror, the easier it would be for me to bear it. But I couldn't let Nan grow up with—that. When I asked Geoff for a divorce he never asked me why. He knew. He might not have given up Nan so easily if it hadn't been for the doctor who said she must be sent away to boarding school."

"Yet you let Nan see him from time to time?"

"I wasn't afraid of Geoff. I knew he wasn't vicious or maniacal—dangerous to Nan or me. I'm sure he killed on impulse under tremendous provocation. It was only not knowing anything and having to live with mystery and terror, day after day. I wanted to but I couldn't. A few weeks ago, when I heard there was a stranger in town asking questions about Frank Bly, I telegraphed Geoff to stay away. Instead, he came here as soon as he could. His idea of protecting me."

"Does Nan know?"

"Of course not."

Bly looked at her almost with awe. "Do you realize what you've been telling me? If

Vanbrugh did kill this man, he is also the man who tried to kill me. He may have mistaken me for this other man in the dark. That would make the second, successful attack premeditated."

"Oh, no! Geoff isn't capable of calculated violence." Tessie frowned. "Perhaps this stranger attacked you?"

"A comfortable solution." Bly's voice was arid. "Put it all on a stranger who is dead and cannot speak for himself! But why?"

"I don't know." The last word was long-drawn as a moan. "Frank, I don't want to know. I'm so afraid." She looked at him now, and he recalled the word she had used for Vanbrugh's eyes—*tortured*. "It may be something that will hurt me, and I've had enough of being hurt. Truly, I have. I suppose it's no use."

She glanced toward the mirror with the saddest smile he had ever seen. "Would it have made a difference if I had still been the Tessie Vanbrugh you used to know?"

Bly surprised himself. "Don't, Tessie! You know that I shall go away now and forget everything."

"You'll go?" Joy leaped into her eyes. "Soon? Now? Tonight?"

"Tonight if that will make

you happier. There's a late train to New York. But let me take you home first."

"Oh, no! Someone might hear us, and I'm supposed to be asleep in my own room. Alone, I can be very quiet."

"As you wish." He took one of her hands, brushed it with his lips. It was like tasting ashes.

Then she was gone, and Bly was alone in a bleak world with a bitter flavor in his mouth, the aftertaste of dead youth.

Upstairs, he threw a few necessities into an overnight bag, with the automatic he no longer cared about, then changed into his oldest, most comfortable tweeds. In the lower hall he caught a glimpse of his own grim face in the mirror as he put on his hat. He looked down at his right hand, flexing the fingers that had healed long ago. Had Geoff done that?

Suddenly he couldn't believe it. Not Geoff, the man who had fed him in the roadside diner and taken him home. But then who?

He picked up his bag.

A strange voice spoke from the living room. "In a hurry?"

Bly turned to face the arch. "Who are you?"

The man who ambled toward him was on the wrong side of fifty, shrunken and tough as old leather. His clothes

were a little too prosperous, almost flashy. His stolid manner was overdone.

"I'm Archibald D. Gesell. The door was unlatched." He held out a gold badge enameled with the words: *Yarborough Police Commission*.

Bly collected his wits. "Very well, Mr. Commissioner. I can't imagine what you want of me, but—"

"No idea why I'm here?"

"None whatever." Bly tried to smile amiably as he said, "You tell me."

Gesell contemplated the toe of one boot. "Man was murdered tonight. Man you know and saw tonight. And you were sure hell-bent on making yourself scarce mighty quick."

"Who was the man?"

Gesell looked up. His eyes were small and shrewd. "Geoffrey Vanbrugh."

Tessie, Tessie, why do I always end by doubting you? It was you who said, "You'll go soon? Now? Tonight?" Did you know then that Vanbrugh was dead, that my sudden departure for New York must focus suspicion on me? And when you were spinning that fine tale about Geoff, delicate and intricate as everything else about you, did you know that poor Geoff could never dispute a word you told me, because he was no longer alive? Haggard

and gray and old as you look, you still have magic and mystery. You can still weave the old bewitching dance around me with your eyes and hands and voice, so I believe anything you say, do anything you ask of me.

Bly looked at Gesell. "Didn't Freud say that men go through life making the same mistake again and again?"

"I don't get you."

"Never mind, Mr. Commissioner. I'm at your disposal."

Gesell looked toward the dining room. "Okay, boys; come on in. Mind if we go through that bag of yours, Mr. Longworth?"

"Not at all." As heavy footfalls clattered across the floor, Bly remembered too late the automatic in the suitcase.

The sky turned from pale gray to a paler blue, bathed in the pearl light that comes just before dawn. Then it was a fiery rose-red. And still Gesell's monotone went on.

Why had Bly walked to and from the Vanbrughs' home instead of taking his car? Why hadn't he gone to bed when he got home? Why was he carrying an automatic? Could his house-keeper substantiate his claim that he had been alone reading in the living room for several hours, then decided on impulse

to catch the late train to New York? Was he quite sure that he'd had no visitors?

"No visitors." Bly lit his twentieth cigarette. "I walked to and from the Vanbrughs' just because I like to walk. I sat up late reading because I like to read. Now will you tell me how Vanbrugh died? And when?"

"We're asking the questions, Mr. Longworth. What's your business?"

"I write."

"For newspapers or magazines?"

"Neither. I write books about foreign countries."

"What was the name of your last book?"

Inwardly Bly cursed the modern publisher's fancy for eccentric titles with promotion possibilities. *"In Thought Again.* Asia. Matthew Arnold's poem. Asia bowing in deep disdain and plunging in thought again. That's the name of my book."

"I see." Obviously he didn't see. "You write under your own name, Mr. Longworth?"

Tessie and Nan, Denise and Strawn—have you already told the police that I am Frank Bly? Their records show that Geoffrey Vanbrugh was a witness in the unsolved murder of Frank Bly. If I'm identified as Bly they'll dig out the whole story.

Bly took a breath. "All my

books are signed Stephen Longworth."

Gesell might not be bookish, but he was sharp. "And that is your own name?"

A detective spoke up. "That's how he signed the lease for this house. I saw it, because my sister works in the real-estate office."

"Okay." Gesell rose. "You're not to leave Yarborough until we give the word."

The door slammed.

Bly let out his breath and went to the telephone. Like an automaton he went through the familiar motions of smoking with one hand and dialing with the other. A distant bell throbbed. A gruff voice said, "Mrs. Vanbrugh's residence. Who's calling?"

His conscious mind was far away, his oldest reflexes in control as he answered, "Frank Bly."

He slammed the telephone into its cradle, breaking the connection. They couldn't trace a dial call, but that gruff voice had certainly been the voice of a policeman stationed in the home of the murdered man to screen all visitors and telephone calls.

Gesell wouldn't believe in a voice from the dead. Gesell would start looking for a stranger in the neighborhood

who might be Bly under another name. If Stephen Longworth was going to act at all, he would have to act fast. At any moment now he might lose all freedom of movement. Holding him as a material witness, they would call it.

He dialed Strawn's number, and Strawn himself answered.

"Longworth speaking. I must talk to you, but not over the phone."

"Could you come here? The police have left us. I don't believe they'll be back today."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Bly remembered Strawn's house as a simple bungalow, weatherbeaten shingles in a tangle of underbrush. Now two wings had been added, and the whole was freshly painted white with wine-red shutters. Even the brush had been cleared away to make a terraced garden descending to the river by easy stages.

A maid showed Bly into the living room, the original bungalow with all inside walls removed. Denise reclined on a chaise near one of the garden windows, her ample figure disguised by a loose, cream-colored housecoat, her small plump feet shod in cherry-colored satin that matched her lipstick. Strawn looked as limp and wilted as the white shirt

and dinner jacket he had been wearing ever since last night. Between them stood a small table with a breakfast tray and an extra cup for Bly.

"Thanks." He drank the coffee gratefully. "What happened?"

Strawn groaned. "We left just after you did. We got home as our clock was striking two. Denise went to bed. I stayed downstairs to drink a whiskey and soda. I was just finishing it at a quarter of three when the police came."

"And Vanbrugh?"

"He stood in the doorway as we drove off. Apparently he didn't go back into the house. He sat on the terrace a while—there were cigarette butts—and then wandered alone down to the site of the old boathouse. It was Nan who noticed the light still on in the living room windows at two thirty. From her bedroom windows she could see the light reflected on the grass outside. She went downstairs. The living room was empty. Then she realized that she hadn't heard her father come in, so she went down to the river."

Nan, Nan, will you never learn caution?

"He wasn't in the water," said Strawn bluntly. "He was lying on the old pier, the back of his head crushed. He

couldn't have done it himself. And it wasn't the fall. He had fallen forward. Nan called the police. Tessie was fast asleep when they reached the house."

Fast asleep? I doubt it, Tessie. If you were in bed at all you were wide-eyed, staring at darkness, longing for sleep. But thank heavens you got back in time before the police arrived.

"It's the second time Nan has found a body." Denise frowned. "If she hadn't been so little the first time—"

"Well?" Bly spoke sharply.

"Oh, I don't know, but there have been child murderers. Who can tell what goes on in the mind of a child? It can't understand right and wrong."

Bly controlled his first flash of anger. But it lent force to his voice as he turned on Strawn. "You hear that? Even Nan is going to be suspected now! Isn't it time you told the whole truth?"

"Bly, it's not my secret," protested Strawn. "I can't."

"No?" Bly's tone was ominous. "Either you tell me now or I tell the police you're hiding something. I want the whole story now."

Strawn looked utterly defeated, eyes dull, mouth slack. "Can't you guess the truth?"

"I don't want to guess. I want facts."

Strawn winced. He went on

in a lifeless voice. "That man whose body was identified as yours. It was Tessie who killed him."

"No, Tessie, I don't believe it! You might beguile a man, bewitch him and trick him, but you wouldn't kill, would you?"

Bly's voice was expressionless. "Why do you think so?"

"It goes back to the night after you disappeared. Geoff came here late and woke me. He told me to throw on some clothes. He needed help. He led me down to the boathouse pier and—well, the body was there. Dead. I said, 'Geoff, did you kill him?' Geoff answered, 'Of course not. I heard a cry as I was getting out of my car. I came here and found him, lying just as you see him now.'

"I was sleepy, perhaps impatient. I said, 'So what? Do you call the police while I wait here?' Geoff shook his head. 'No, Dick, we can't do that. Not after what he said just before he died.'

"That woke me up. I said, 'He was alive?' Geoff replied, 'He was dying. He died as I knelt beside him. Legally, the words of a dying man are evidence, not hearsay, even at second-hand. Death is supposed to dig the truth out of people.'

"I knew then that it was going to be something pretty terrible. I said, 'For the love of

heaven, Geoff, what did he say?"

"Geoff answered in that dreadfully quiet voice people use for the really bad things of life: 'He said that Tessie killed him.'

"It was a shock, even to me. Think what it must have been for Geoff, her husband. You know Tessie. You know how impossible it is to associate her with ugliness. I had sense enough to ask, 'He said it in those words?'

"Geoff shook his head. 'Not in just those words. He was gasping for breath and it came out brokenly: *I have pain . . . at the head . . . Your wife she is vicious, a murdereress . . . she killed me.*'" Strawn buried his face in his hands.

"So you and Vanbrugh pushed the body into the water hoping it would be carried out to sea? Or at least far down the river?"

Strawn nodded without uncovering his face.

"You were a good friend to Vanbrugh. And to Tessie."

Again Strawn nodded.

Denise was lighting a cigarette in an ivory holder mounted in gold. Her eyes were skeptical but tolerant, intensely Gallic. "That friendship!" She shrugged.

"Who was he?" demanded Bly.

"I have no idea. I never saw him before."

"Why did you and Vanbrugh identify him later as Frank Bly?"

"Nan gave us the idea. Mistaking the body for yours when she found it face down in the water. Tessie had no motive for murdering you, a boy she had befriended and mothered. She must have had some motive for murdering this other man. His identity would have revealed that motive and led the police back to Tessie."

"We thought it was safe because we thought you were dead anyway. Drowned. Otherwise, you wouldn't have left your own money in the boathouse. You'd either have taken it with you or come back for it."

Strawn dropped his hands and looked up. "Now perhaps you can imagine how we felt four years later when I received that five thousand dollars anonymously. It couldn't be anything but conscience money from you. It proved that you were alive, that there was one man in the world who would know instantly, if he ever returned to Yarborough, that the dead body buried as Bly was not Bly. One man who would be sure to believe that Geoff and I had killed the other man, since we had identified

him falsely. Who but a murderer would have a motive for false identification?

"I told Geoff he ought to tell Tessie you were still alive. But he wouldn't. He said they had never discussed the dead man at all. He even managed to smile as he said, 'What did you expect, Dick? A man can't go to his wife and say, "Well, dear, I've just learned you murdered someone last night. Anyone I know?"'

"Geoff couldn't accuse Tessie to her face of murder. She would have denied it. She's a romantic. She cannot face unpleasant realities. She would probably lie to herself about it and believe her own lie. Telling herself that she didn't really mean to kill him, only to stun him. That he staggered back when she struck with the hammer, so he really killed himself.

"I asked then if Tessie had never said a word to him. Reluctantly he answered, 'Only once. That night I found the man dying she was in the hall when I finally got back to the house. She said something about seeing a strange man at the boathouse. Pretty plain, wasn't it? She was trying to find out if I had seen or heard anything. Almost a confession.

"I said there was no man there now. I said she should

forget she had seen one. Then I realized something. She had been alone. She had no alibi and it must be worrying her. I saw a way to reassure her. For I had been alone, too, until I wakened you. So I was free to tell her that if anyone ever asked her where I had been that evening she was to say that she and I had been together all the time. That was practically telling her I knew, wasn't it? If she had wanted to confide in me I gave her the opportunity. But she didn't."

Strawn paused, and then said, "That's just the way Geoff told it to me."

"And I never knew! All these years!" Denise crushed her cigarette stub furiously. "Oh, Dick, you were not fair to me!"

"I wanted to spare you," he insisted. "Just as Geoff wanted to spare Tessie."

Bly was grinning sardonically. "So I was right. You and Tessie and Vanbrugh were all holding some things back last night."

"But it was you who exploded the bombshell," returned Strawn. "Your story of the attack on you fifteen years ago. Geoff was deeply disturbed and I was the only one who knew why. He couldn't believe that Tessie would have done such a thing. If she hadn't, why,

then, perhaps she hadn't killed the other man either and the whole thing was a ghastly misunderstanding between them. On the other hand, if she had tried to kill twice, she must really be dangerous and he had done a wicked thing to protect her for so long."

"*Vicious . . . a murderer . . .*" Denise repeated the words of the dying man as if she could not quite believe them. "She was all that and worse if she killed Geoff last night."

"But why would Tessie kill Geoff?" demanded Strawn.

Denise sighed. "She didn't know Geoff had confided in you, Dick. She thought Geoff was the only man in the world who knew she was guilty. And she was afraid he might break down now and admit it under the new pressure from Mr. Longworth—I mean Bly. So, in a way, Mr. Bly is responsible for Geoff's death."

"Am I?" Bly walked over to the window. On the river a white-sailed boat was tacking against the wind, buoyant as a bird, accenting by contrast the wormlike progress of a long line of loaded barges.

"That cabinet of yours, Mrs. Strawn," said Bly. "It was brought to Yarborough by barge, wasn't it?"

"Yes, what of it?"

"Those barges made me think of it again. Somehow, the cabinet from France seems to have been the starting point of all this business. Money changed hands because of it and then disappeared. The same evening I was accused of the theft and nearly killed at the boathouse. One day later another man, a stranger, was actually killed in the very place where I had been attacked, and then, five weeks later when his body was found, he was buried under my name. And finally the boathouse burned down. The pattern is queer because the connecting links are missing."

Denise turned to Bly with a brilliant smile. "Just why did you send the money back four years later?"

Bly returned the smile. "You forget, Mrs. Strawn, I have never admitted that it was I who took the money or that it was I who returned it."

Strawn was irritated. "Why don't you admit it now? Shouldn't you tell the police? If the whole story comes out you can clear up that one point for them. And you must have taken it or you wouldn't have sent it back."

"I admit nothing."

"Why not? No one will prosecute now you've returned it."

"But people would think less

well of me, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know that they would. A boy of seventeen, without family or friends or a penny of his own. A man who went straight afterward, made a success of his life, and returned the money. Lots of people have darker secrets than that!"

"Have they?" Bly seemed to be turning this over in his mind. Again he looked at Denise. "How valuable is that cabinet today?"

"It can't be valued in money. There are only a few examples of Sixteenth Century inlay left in the world today. The most famous, one quite like this, is in a museum in New York."

"How did your father acquire such a museum piece?"

"That's an amusing story. He bought it for two hundred francs from a peasant in Brittany who was using it as a rabbit hutch. The peasant didn't know the value of inlay. My father did."

"So there you are."

It was Nan's voice. She was standing just inside the French door, hatless, her hair wind-blown. The skin around her eyes was dark as a bruise.

"Nan!" Bly took a step toward her.

"If you hadn't come back, if you had let the dead past bury its dead, he might be alive."

There was no reproach in her voice. It was dull and flat, tearless as her eyes.

"My dear child!" Denise rose and put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "Let me ring for fresh coffee. I'm sure you haven't had breakfast."

Listlessly Nan moved away from the embrace. "I don't want coffee or anything else." She turned to Bly again. "Why did you play that trick on the police?"

"Trick?"

"That telephone call. Saying Frank Bly and then cutting the connection."

"It was a slip of the tongue."

"A policeman answered the telephone. Gesell questioned Mother again. Mostly about you. She had to tell him that Stephen Longworth was Frank Bly. Gesell was annoyed. Mother had to tell him everything then. He thinks either you or Mother killed Father."

Strawn rose heavily. "I'd better see Gesell and tell him all the things I didn't tell him last night. I can't stand by and see an innocent man suspected."

Denise looked quizzical. "What you really mean, dear, is that you're afraid he'll suspect you if he finds out all these things before you volunteer them!"

When he had gone, she

arched one silky, black brow. "Poor Dick! He thinks realism is cynicism. He lives in a world of illusion."

"Nan!" There was an urgent note in Bly's voice. "Do you think I killed your father?"

Time was suspended as she looked into his eyes. At last she whispered, "No."

"Then let me take you home."

He turned the car into a narrow track through the woods. He spoke quietly. "Nan, when are you going to tell me the truth?"

"About what?" She avoided his eyes.

He stopped the car and shut off the engine. He turned to look at her. "The money. You took it, didn't you?"

She kept her profile toward him, eyes veiled by thick, golden lashes. "How did you know?"

"It came to me in a flash of realization four years after I left Yarborough. When the money was stolen the others were all out on the river, except you and me. That's why they were so sure I had taken it. But I hadn't, and there wasn't anybody else but you. They never even thought of you, did they?"

"No." Still, she avoided his eyes. "It was you who sent the

money anonymously?"

"Yes.

"A few thousand didn't mean much to me at the time. I was making plenty and I was out in the Persian hinterland where there were few ways to spend it. Though I hadn't taken the money I began to feel like an accessory, because I knew who had taken it and I wasn't telling.

"I couldn't write and tell them. That wouldn't have been fair to you. You were only nine then. I got to thinking about you and how you might have been struggling under a burden of secret guilt for the last four years, so I yielded to an impulse. I directed my New York bank to send the money in cash to Strawn.

"I assumed he would tell your parents and you would hear about it and feel better. In the back of my mind there was a shadowy idea of letting four people in Yarborough know that Frank Bly had not forgotten them, including the one who had tried to kill him. I wanted that one to know that some day Frank Bly might come back. But I had to do it anonymously so no one would ask me who had taken the money."

"You must have been quite fond of me when I was a child."

"I was. Now tell me why you took the money."

"It's so silly. I'm ashamed to tell you. Try to think back to your own childhood and remember what the mind of a child is like. Do you recall that you were going to make me a doll's house out of the packing case the cabinet came in? And we were saving violet-and-silver wrapping paper from Mother's boxes of candy for the dollhouse wallpaper? That last afternoon you took the packing case down to the boathouse and started work on it. And you said we needed just one more candy-box wrapper.

"I wandered into the locker room and saw what looked like a new box of candy. I took it for the sake of the wrapping paper. I was going to give the box to Mother. I knew she wouldn't mind, because I had done that before. I had just got the package up to my room at the house when Agatha called me to my five o'clock supper. I ran downstairs, leaving it there, unopened, and forgot about it until that night.

"My room was over Father's study. I heard voices, yours and his and Dick's, so loud they woke me up. I crept downstairs barefoot in pajamas and listened at the door. I heard them accuse you of stealing money. Dick said it was wrapped in

colored paper from a candy box and he'd left it in the locker room. Then I knew what I had taken."

"Frank, I was scared to death. I could tell by your voice that you were frightened. And I was only five. I heard the word *police*. I thought that they would send me to prison for years. I slipped upstairs and unwrapped the package to make sure the money was inside. It was, and I remembered I had seen a fire when I passed the living-room door.

"I went downstairs again. Luck was with me. You were just crossing the lawn toward the boathouse, but Father was still in the study and Dick was in the dining room. The living room was empty. I put the money and the wrapping paper on the fire and waited until they were burned to ashes. Then I went back upstairs to bed and put my head under the covers and cried, without making any noise."

"And you never told your parents?"

"Never. There are so many things children cannot tell their parents. Next day it was pretty bad when I heard you had disappeared. Later, when I found that dead body face down in the water, my guilt made me sure that it was your body—that you had killed

yourself because of what I had done to you. My burning the money and keeping silent had made it impossible for you to prove that you were not a thief."

"Poor little Nan!" He put his hand over hers. "No wonder you were ill!"

"You forgive me? Now?"

"I would forgive you anything, any time." He took her in his arms. "Now, Nan, at last I know why I came back to Yarborough."

Slowly tears welled under the tawny lashes. "Frank, I'm afraid. Who did it? Who killed Father? Of course I know it wasn't Mother or you—but who?"

He frowned, looking down the empty road. "It must be the same person who attacked me and killed that other man. When a murderer kills he does it to produce a definite result by eliminating the man he kills. For all practical purposes I was dead for at least four years, until I sent the money to Strawn suggesting that Frank Bly might be alive. What happened in those four years, when the murderer believed I was dead and eliminated forever, that would not have happened if I'd been here alive and active?"

"Mother and Father got a divorce. Dick and Denise got

married. Mother and Father became poor. Dick and Denise became rich. I was ill; then I got better and was sent away to school and college. That's all that happened to any of us, really. Is there any one of those things that would not have happened if you had been here?"

"I don't know." Bly was still frowning thoughtfully. "It was the day the cabinet came that this began."

"You unpacked it yourself," Nan reminded him. "Was it empty or was there anything inside?"

"Only an old key." Abruptly he switched on the ignition.

"Where are we going?" asked Nan.

"To your house, to take another look at the cabinet!"

The police had gone. The living room was empty. Three tall windows framed the sky, three panels of a pure cobalt blue. Nan crossed the room to the cabinet. Lovingly she touched the inlay.

Bly took the handle of hand-wrought iron and let down the drop leaf. There were two shelves inside, record albums on one, a pile of sheet music on the other. Behind the albums lay a flat parcel of old newspaper. Bly opened it.

He was holding a great iron

key, its bow star-shaped, its bit wrought in a pattern of lilies and roses. The paper fluttered to the floor, a newspaper fragment, old, brown, crumbling at the edges.

Nan picked it up. "French, dated May 2, 1924. I suppose the packers just used the newspapers of the day. What a pity they weren't saved. Think what interesting reading they'd make in 1949!"

"I left them in the boathouse," said Bly. "They were probably burned when it caught fire."

Nan was still musing as she looked down at the fragment in her hand. "French columnists don't have to worry about any libel laws."

"What do you have there?"

"The end of a column signed Pierre Bourrelle. All about a murder trial. Some woman was acquitted of murdering her husband. He says the evidence proved her guilty. He blames the verdict on the traditional gallantry of a French jury."

Bly nodded. "They acquit most women murderers, the guilty and the innocent. Who was this one?"

"There's no name here." Nan turned the fragment over. "Oh, what luck! Here's the beginning of the column on the other side. This murderer's name was—" Suddenly her voice

blanched. "—Denise de Beaupré."

"Did I hear my own name?"

Nan started as if she were the one trapped and guilty. Denise stood just inside the farthest of the French doors, still as a woman painted on a backdrop of cobalt. Her smile was brightly enameled with fuchsia lipstick. Her dress was black, with emeralds at one wrist, and a dark fur cape hung from her shoulders. The leather bag in one hand was emerald green.

"I had a suspicion you two were up to something when you left me. That's why I came here."

Still smiling, she descended three shallow steps into the room.

Bly rose and stepped between the two women. Nan was no actress. Her face was almost as white as her blouse. Bly achieved a smile for Denise. "We were admiring the cabinet. I wonder you had the heart to part with it."

"In those days thousands of dollars meant a great deal to me." Denise was crossing the room, tottering on her tiny, high-heeled shoes. She subsided prettily into a wing chair.

Bly followed and stood before her, resting one hand on the mantelshelf as he had last night after dinner. "I suppose

that was why you took the risk of having the cabinet brought to this country."

"Risk? It was insured."

"I wasn't thinking of insurable risk. It wasn't the inlaid cabinet itself that started this chain of events fifteen years ago. It was the old newspapers the cabinet was packed in—French newspapers of the month and year when you were tried for murder in Paris. Evidently you didn't know the packers had used them for wrapping until that morning when the packing case arrived and I broke it open on the terrace. I remember your gasp—like a cry of pain. I thought you were afraid I would hurt the cabinet with my penknife when I slashed the twine that held the padding in place.

"Your one hope was to get rid of those newspapers before anyone who understood French looked at them. But you had no chance to do so. When I was alone on the terrace with Strawn I told him I could read French, and he said I could take the newspapers down to the boathouse. He must have mentioned that to you later when you were all out on the river in the cruiser. So you had to kill me and burn the boathouse where those papers were stored.

"With those papers burned unread there wasn't one chance in a thousand that anyone in a small American town like Yarborough would ever hear of anything that had happened so long ago and far away as an obscure murder trial in Paris in 1924. Ironically, you didn't know about the old key also wrapped in newspaper. You were at the far end of the room when Vanbrugh and Tessie discovered that, and it's been hidden behind this pile of record albums ever since.

"Today I learned that the man buried under my name spoke as he lay dying. He said, *I have pain at the head . . . your wife she is vicious, a murderer . . .* The words are English, but the sentence structure is French. When I heard that, I knew he must have been French, and that you were the one most likely to have killed him. Vanbrugh, who heard him, thought the words, 'your wife,' referred to Tessie.

"But last night you said that your friends in France thought you were already married to Strawn when you sent for the cabinet. This Frenchman prowling around the Vanbrugh place where you were a guest saw and recognized you. The only man living in the same house was Vanbrugh. Believing you were married, the Frenchman mis-

took Vanbrugh for your husband, Strawn, whom he had never seen. 'Your wife' meant Denise de Beaupré, not Tessie Vanbrugh.

"Last night you claimed that you were alone in this living room at the time I was attacked. Now I know you lied. The living room was empty then. Nan, a child of five, came in and found it empty at the very time you said you were here. Fortunately for her, she never mentioned that to anyone but me.

"Vanbrugh was less fortunate. He could see the path to the boathouse from his study window. Fifteen years ago he watched me go down that path. He must have seen you follow me, but your presence did not rouse his suspicion until last night, when he learned for the first time of the murderous attack on me just afterward. He didn't give you away when we were all together last night. He was too good a friend for that. He would wait for a private explanation.

"So you came back to his house a second time last night while your husband was drinking alone in his own living room. You met Vanbrugh on the terrace, doubtless by prearrangement, and you induced him to go down to the pier with you, pretending you

could only explain what had happened on the site of the attack. Once safely there you killed him.

"All along I have realized that something must have happened to the Vanbrughs or Strawn or you in the last fifteen years that would not have happened if I had not been eliminated. Now I see what that thing was. Your marriage to Strawn. You were beautiful and I am sure that Strawn loved you. No ordinary obstacle would have kept him from marrying you—poverty, illness, scandal. But would he have married a woman who had murdered her first husband? A woman who was free only because she had been acquitted by an obviously susceptible jury? I think not. And evidently you thought the same way.

"Now, tell me one more thing. Who was the Frenchman?"

Her face was still as a mask of white plaster with fuchsia-painted lips. Those lips scarcely moved as she whispered, "Pierre Bourrelle. A journalist. A friend of my husband's who hated me. He came here all the way from France when he heard of my second marriage. He prowled about looking for evidence against me. He had the presumption to say that my second husband should be

warned. I was not married to Dick yet. Of course I killed Bourrelle.

"I made two dreadful mistakes: Letting my father's lawyer know I was going to marry Dick when I wrote asking for the cabinet. But I was so proud of that! And then the other was using my true name in America, Denise de Beaupré. That was how Bourrelle traced me. But what could I do? The name was on my passport. I might want to leave the country at any time and I would have to have a passport. And I soon found that no one in America had ever heard of Denise de Beaupré for good or evil."

Bly felt a hard grip on his arm. Nan was standing close behind him. Anger blazed in her tawny eyes as she looked at Denise, sunk in self-pity. Nan spoke. "I can understand your killing Bourrelle. He was like a blackmailer, only worse, because he was doing it for malice, not just for money. But I cannot understand your killing my father, your oldest and best friend here, just to save your own skin. And I can't understand your trying to kill Frank. Suppose he *had* read those papers? He'd have seen you were acquitted."

"And he would also have seen in every editorial column that my acquittal meant noth-

ing!" Fiercely Denise turned to Bly. "Would you have kept silent? After learning I was going to marry Dick Strawn?"

"I don't know," admitted Bly.

"Even now you have no case against me," she went on more calmly. "I was acquitted of the murder of my first husband. There is no conclusive evidence that I killed Bourrelle or Geoff or that I tried to kill you. All you really have is a motive for my trying to kill you."

"Then why did you admit all these things?" gasped Nan.

Denise was looking at Bly, desperately. "You understand, don't you? It's my way of asking for mercy. I'm telling you everything so you may see my side of it. I love Dick Strawn. That's the whole story in four words."

"Mercy? For you!" Nan's scorn was savage.

Bly spoke gravely. "I don't suppose I shall say anything to the police."

"Frank!"

Bly went on as if Nan had not spoken. "But I shall give this newspaper fragment to Dick Strawn."

The red mouth in the white face twisted, pulling muscles out of shape, plowing lines from lips to chin. There was something close to madness in the bright, dry glaze of the

eyes. She whispered, "I don't believe you would do *that*?"

"I must do it." Bly's face was stony. "Strawn must know the truth now."

The catch of her green leather bag snapped open. The small gun seemed to leap into her hand with a motion of its own. Nan covered her eyes with her hands, but she could not shut out the loud report that shattered the stillness. Denise took two steps on her absurdly

tight, high-heeled shoes, then lurched and sprawled heavily.

Only when he knew Denise was dead did Bly turn to look at Nan. She was sobbing as he took her in his arms. "That was dangerous. And brutal."

"Yes." He looked down at the head on his shoulder. "I've been told that I take too many risks. And that I have no mercy for my enemies. But a good hater makes a good lover."

He kissed her.



# George Harmon Coxe

## The Appearance of Truth (Black Target)

*About Dr. Paul Standish, medical doctor and city medical examiner . . . It looked like a simple case—the murder of a hoodlum, a muscle man, a thoroughly unsavory character “up twice for assault and once for manslaughter.” But Dr. Standish had a large bump of curiosity. He found a piece of evidence that seemed out of kilter with the obviousness of the case and he remembered what his mentor had always said: “The truth always rings true, but the appearance of truth varies widely.”*

*String along with Doc Standish . . . a short novel, complete in this volume . . .*

### Detective: DR. PAUL STANDISH

Until 9:50 in the evening of this Monday in late September, Paul Standish had devoted his time, as a young doctor should, to the demands of a modest but growing private practice. Not until he had put his car away, and was approaching the entrance of his apartment house, was it necessary for him to contend with the additional duties of his official job as County Medical Examiner.

The deduction was a simple one, once he spotted the police sedan at the curb and recognized the driver. It had

happened before, and he knew that the dispatcher at headquarters had been trying to reach him and, failing in this, had sent the car to wait for him. He stepped into the car resignedly. There was no telling now at what hour he'd get to bed.

“What is it this time?” he asked.

“A shooting.” The driver stepped on the starter. “Homicide, I guess.”

They drove rapidly cross-town then, coming presently to this block on the outer fringe of the downtown section, a

neighborhood of small dis-couraged-looking shops which had corrupted the residential character of the stone houses originally constructed there. Two police cars stood opposite a narrow entrance adjacent to a radio repair shop. Beyond this, the ambulance from the morgue had backed diagonally into the curb, and Standish spoke briefly to the driver.

A uniformed policeman stood in the doorway, another waited in the third-floor hall, where a door stood open. The living room beyond was hot, stuffy, and crowded, but of those present only the police photographer paid any attention to the still figure in the easy chair.

Lieutenant Ballard, of Homicide, was talking to the precinct captain and two plainclothes men. They glanced up at Standish's entrance, greeting him perfunctorily. The photographer nodded and stepped aside; then Standish got a look at the man in the chair: a tall, powerfully built man who might have been considered good-looking in a superficial, hard-jawed way; a fellow of thirty or so, clad in slacks, slippers, and a T-shirt stained darkly across the front.

After he had put down his bag Paul Standish stood a moment examining the dead

man's face and finding it familiar, though the name escaped him. Then, while one part of his mind considered other things, he went about his job, lifting the lids to examine the eyes, gently testing for rigor as he manipulated the muscles of the jaw, neck, knee.

When he finished he stepped back to take a notebook from his bag and jot down his findings. He was still at it when Lieutenant Ballard moved up beside him.

Standish glanced up. "What's his name?"

"George Fleming. A hood-lum, a muscle man. Worked Florida winters as an odd-job bouncer, and lately he's been hustling for that gyp second-hand car lot at Grove and Fourth. Up twice for assault and once for manslaughter."

"Also," Standish added quietly, "he was up for something else."

"Oh?"

"Three months ago. A traffic death. Fleming ran down a man by the name of Tremaine one Saturday night."

Ballard frowned, then nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "I sort of remember. Tremaine was a broker."

"And my testimony got Fleming off with the suspension of his driver's license," Standish said. "Because Tremaine was

dead-drunk and the post-mortem proved it."

"Yeah." Ballard nodded again. "Well, it doesn't matter. When I walked in here I figured someone had ordered him rubbed out. Instead of that, he got killed over a dame named Sylvia Keith. Works as a hat-check girl at the Club Neilan."

He rocked on heel and toe, a solid-looking man in his late thirties with sandy hair and steady gray eyes that were wise and experienced. Mature eyes.

"This is the kind of case I understand," he said, "and sometimes things break for us. The way it stacks up," he said, still sounding pleased, "is that the Keith woman had been seeing a youngster named Estey, and Fleming didn't like it. He and Estey had a knockdown, drag-out fight the night before last, with Estey taking the beating. The kid got a gun—we've found a bartender who saw it—and tonight he used it. If it hadn't been for the fact that this is the night the Club Neilan is closed we'd have had the girl by now."

He turned away as a plainclothes man addressed him, and Standish went back to his notebook. On a fresh sheet he sketched a plan of the room, noting the doors, windows, the position of the body. He had no

idea that it would ever be used; it was simply part of a routine which had been taught him by Old Doc Lathrop, who had given him a job as an assistant in the days when he needed such fees, and had groomed the younger man to take his place as medical examiner before he retired. Now, having finished his sketch and noting that the police photographer was through he went to the hall door and summoned the ambulance men.

Even with the body removed the room seemed crowded. The air was blue with tobacco smoke, and traffic was heavy as detectives milled about and waited their turn for consultations with Ballard and the precinct captain. Wanting to wash his hands before he left and not sure just where the bath was, Standish backed into an alcove which served as a kitchenette.

Here there were a small icebox, a two-plate burner, and kitchen cabinets along one wall over the sink. A damp dish towel hung from a rack, but a roll of paper towels had been fastened in a recess, and Standish tore off two of these to dry his hands. The resulting wad of paper he threw at a metal wastebasket under the sink, missed, then stooped to retrieve it.

A lifetime habit of personal neatness had prompted him to make the effort, and it was this same "characteristic neatness that took him one step more. For, having picked up the towels, he noticed a smaller, folded piece of paper—apparently thrown there by someone not quite so neat—which he reached for instinctively.

Only when he had it in his hand and noticed its whiteness and odd folds did he check his movement and take a second look, and in this he was moved, not by any suspicion, but by a vague curiosity that had as its basis no more than a familiarity with other folded bits of paper of similar size and smoothness.

That is how he happened to hunker back and open up the folds, to notice the residue of some colorless, crystalline substance which gave off a faint odor, not characteristic but aromatic. When he isolated a grain and touched it to his tongue the taste was bitter.

He rose then, a tallish man not much past thirty, lean to the point of thinness, his gaze somber and sightless as it fixed on the wall above the sink. He had no ears for the buzz of conversation or the restless movement in the adjoining room; it was several seconds before he glanced again at the

paper in his hand and began to refold it with practiced fingers. When he had tucked it into his pocket he glanced again round the kitchenette, then walked back to pick up his bag.

Lieutenant Ballard intercepted him on the way to the door. "This time," he said, his grin self-satisfied, "I won't have to go up against Mary Hayward and get told off. Remind her, will you?"

Mary Hayward was Dr. Standish's nurse, secretary, and Girl Friday. She was jealous of the doctor's time and quite possibly of his affections. She resented particularly the demands that Ballard sometimes made when he was up against a difficult case and needed help, and she didn't hesitate to give voice to her feelings on the matter.

"About the autopsy," Ballard said, "we dug the slug out of the back of the chair, so we're in no hurry."

Standish hesitated, his glance still thoughtful. "I think," he said slowly, "I'll do it tonight if I can get Dr. Loomis to assist."

Ballard's left brow climbed. For a brief moment the gray eyes seemed suspicious, then a smile erased the doubt. "Whatever you say," he remarked. "Just so Mary don't blame me for keeping you up half the night."

Standish made no reply, but went into the hall and down the arrow stairs to the sidewalk. Overhead, the sky was cloudy, but the air was reasonably cool, and he stopped a moment to fill his lungs while he located the police car which had brought him. As he started for it he saw two men and a woman getting out of another police car, and when they started for the doorway that he had just vacated he decided this must be the Keith girl.

Here in the dark and shadowed street he could not tell much about her, except that she seemed young and looked tall for a girl. The lustrous dress she wore revealed her slenderness, and a light, hip-length jacket covered her shoulders. Beyond this he knew only that she was blonde and walked between the two detectives silently and with head bowed.

Paul Standish worked late at night. Assisted by Dr. Morris, a young man who often helped him on a fee basis, Standish had once helped old Doc Lathrop, he performed the autopsy. He also summoned the city chemist and put him to work on a problem that still occupied the specialist when the medical men had finished. Even then Standish did not go

home, but went instead to his office in the morgue; and unlocking the filing cabinets he studied the report he had once made on the traffic death of Walter Tremaine.

At eleven o'clock the next morning he walked into the sizable detective's room which adjoined Lieutenant Ballard's office and saw again the girl he had noticed the night before. She sat just outside Ballard's door, as oblivious of the two plainclothes men who were typing reports as they were of her, oblivious of everything apparently, since she sat rigidly erect, her eyes fixed and glassy, her hands clenched, her thin, high-cheekboned face under the ash-blonde hair tight, colorless, and shiny with perspiration and fatigue.

The doctor in Standish noticed these and other signs which spoke of a hovering hysteria; as a man he was aware of the slanting, deep-set eyes, the long lashes, the full mobile mouth. He had a feeling she did not even see him as he passed in front of her and opened the door.

Lieutenant Ballard was slumped in his desk chair, his appearance suggesting that he had had even less sleep than Standish. His sandy hair was rumpled; so were his clothes. A shave would have done him no

harm. For all of this, his greeting was cheerful. "Hi, Doc," he said. "Sit down."

Standish sat down and asked if it was all right to hear the story. Ballard said it was simple. He said the murdered man, George Fleming, had been bothering Sylvia Keith. She was used to being bothered by men, her job being what it was, but Fleming carried it too far. He was persistent, annoying, objectionable, and when he learned that Ralph Estey was in love with the girl and taking up her time, he took the attitude that if he, Fleming, couldn't have her, neither could Estey.

There was this fight already mentioned, with Estey taking the beating. Estey, who worked for a small-loan company, had a permit to carry a gun. He had gone to Fleming's apartment last night, shot him, and ran out.

"Have you got him?" Standish asked.

Ballard shook his head and stood up. "No," he said shortly, "but we will." He walked to the window and back. "We've got the station, bus terminal, and airport covered. Stakeouts on Estey's apartment, the girl's, the office where he worked. The alarm is—"

He seemed about to add to this, and then, his glance narrowing, he looked at Stan-

dish. "Why all the interest?" he said. "There's no doubt about Fleming dying from that gunshot wound, is there?"

"None. The trouble is," Standish said quietly, "I think someone fed him chloral hydrate before the shooting."

Ballard, in the act of sitting down, clamped his hands on the desk and stayed where he was. "Chloral hydrate?" he shouted. "Knockout drops?" He let himself slowly into the chair. "How do you know?" he demanded.

Standish explained about the folded white paper he had found. He said he recognized it as a "powder paper" used in putting up prescriptions. It was easy enough to analyze the few specks that remained, a much lengthier and more difficult job to be sure that chloral had actually been ingested.

"There isn't any doubt about it, Tom," he said. "I'm stating so in my report."

For a long moment Ballard continued to stare at Standish. Then, abruptly, he jumped up and began to pace the room. He made three fast circuits of the desk. He stopped in front of Standish, his face flushed and his mouth grim.

"There have been times when I needed help from you—and got it," he said, as though all this was the doctor's

ult. "But this isn't one of them. We'll pick up Estey before the day is over. We've got the motive and the opportunity. The D.A.'ll go before the Grand Jury next week and ask for an indictment, and I say he'll get it."

He gulped and said, "If somebody gave Fleming chloral hydrate, then I say it was that same outside. They could have been in this together. Did you get a good look at her?" he demanded. "She's not exactly pretty but she's got something. The kind that men would fight over. She wanted young Estey, and Fleming got in the way, and the two of them—"

He did not finish the thought, realizing perhaps that it sounded too far-fetched. After a moment he sank back into the chair.

"I don't know who gave it to Fleming," Standish said. "But the way to do it would be in food or drink. Probably a drink. Open that little packet when Fleming wasn't looking, dump it into a highball, and wait. That stuff works fast, and when Fleming passed out, whoever did it washed and dried the asses—the dish towel was still damp—cleaned up, threw the folded 'powder paper' at the wastebasket under the sink. And missed, just as I did with the paper towel."

Ballard said nothing, and Standish unbuttoned his jacket and leaned forward in his chair, a new narrowness masking eyes that were now thoughtful and remote.

"This Fleming was a mean one. Up twice for assault and once for manslaughter, you said. The sort you might hire if you wanted someone put out of the way."

"The guy would cool off his own brother if the price was right," Ballard said. And then, as a new thought struck him, "Why?"

"I was wondering if perhaps someone hired him to run down Walter Tremaine and fake that accident."

Ballard's face twisted in a scowl. "Wait a minute!"

Standish went on quickly, his tone quiet but intent as he explained how he had gone over that three-month-old case and refreshed his memory.

"Follow me," he said. "Tremaine was a partner in a prosperous brokerage house. He liked to drink, but he didn't do it during the week. Like a lot of others, he stepped out Saturday nights, always at the same night club for dinner and dancing and drinking.

"He always got drunk but he always behaved himself. He never left until the place closed at one o'clock. He had a

good-looking wife quite a lot younger than he was, who also liked to step out and have a few drinks—though never as many as Tremaine."

He paused and said, "This Saturday night they came out of the club and started across the street between two parked cars. It was then one twenty-eight. Twenty minutes before that, George Fleming came out of a small bar farther up the street. He'd been there over two hours, and during that time he'd had but two highballs. He had trouble starting the car—a second-hand one—which delayed him just long enough. He finally got it going—this is his story, remember—pulled out into the street, and was accelerating fast when Tremaine and his wife stepped from between those cars into his path."

Standish tipped one hand. "Fleming hit Tremaine nearly head-on, killing him almost instantly. The wife was untouched. When she calmed down she explained her escape by saying she thought that her husband—drunk as he was—had been able to shove her backward to safety just before the car struck him. And there was no doubt about his condition. I did an autopsy as soon as I could and the percentage of blood alcohol

indicated a condition close to a stupor at the time he was killed."

Ballard, who had been listening closely, shook his head. "What does that prove, except that it was another accident? Your medical testimony supported that theory and the court must have accepted it as such."

"Because it was the only conclusion possible at the time. If it could have been shown that there was any connection between Fleming and Walter Tremaine, or any of the three people who benefited by his death—"

"But there wasn't any connection."

"Not then."

"Not even now."

"What I'm saying is that an accident such as happened to Tremaine could be a very clever method of murder and very difficult to prove. And if someone had a drink with Fleming and fed him the chloral hydrate—" He let the sentence dangle and took a sheet of paper from his pocket.

"Here's what I mean," he said. "I did some checking this morning before I came over here. Walter Tremaine's estate was roughly about fifty thousand net, which went to his wife. But there was also a hundred-thousand-dollar life

insurance policy with a double indemnity clause. A second regular hundred-thousand-dollar business policy, payable to Warren Choate, his partner, to be used to buy out Tremaine's equity in the partnership. Choate carried the same sort of policy and for the same reason, the idea being that should either die, the hundred thousand was to be paid to the dead man's heirs, the survivor then owning the business outright."

He hesitated to see if Ballard was following him, and then went on. "Now, Tremaine has a younger brother, Donald, who will be thirty-five October twenty-seventh. The father left an estate of something over a hundred grand, but he apparently had no confidence in Donald, because he left Donald's half in trust, with Walter in control. On his thirty-fifth birthday Donald gets the fifty thousand—he would have received it anyway—but with Walter dead here's how it works out:

"The widow gets, roughly, fifty thousand from Tremaine's estate, plus half the double-indemnity policy—one hundred thousand—plus half of the business policy—fifty thousand. That adds up to about two hundred thousand. The brother, Donald, gets the other hundred thousand on the double-indem-

nity policy, plus the remaining half of the business policy—a hundred and fifty thousand in all. But"—Standish tapped the paper against his palm—"it is not payable until the brother reaches thirty-five."

Ballard was not particularly interested, but he listened because Standish was a friend of long standing. Now he roused himself and said, "All right. The widow got her two hundred thousand when Tremaine died. The partner got the business. The brother will get a hundred and fifty grand when he's thirty-five, plus the fifty held in trust from his father's estate. Maybe they're all happy that Walter Tremaine got knocked off. They're certainly all richer because of it. But where does George Fleming come into the picture?"

He went on quickly without waiting for an answer. What he said carried no overtones of animosity or ridicule—because he had known Standish as an intern and suspected, even then, that the young doctor had a keen interest in crime. He believed that Standish continued to act as medical examiner because of this interest, though this was something Standish had never admitted, even to himself.

"Look, Doc," he said. "This time I think I've got the answer.

I think the D.A.'ll get an indictment. You come up with some real proof to support your theory and I'll listen. Until then let's leave it a police job."

Standish put away his paper and stood up. He said maybe Ballard was right. It was just an idea of his, and somehow he did not think the answer was as simple as Ballard wanted it to be. Then, as a new thought came to him, he said, "What about that girl out there? Are you holding her?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Why?"

"She looks as if she's taken about all she can take. She might blow up on you."

"Hysterics, you mean?" Ballard looked concerned. "What do you think I should do?"

"Well—if you don't have to hold her I'll take her home and give her a couple pills. She'll make more sense if she has a chance to relax."

Ballard listened with respect. "Sure," he said. "Do that, will you? I don't want any trouble with her."

He opened the door and led Standish over to the girl, who seemed not to have moved a muscle since he had last seen her. Her thin face was still tight and grayish, the eyes fixed.

"This is Dr. Standish," Ballard said. "Miss Keith . . . He'll take you home."

Standish took the girl's arm. Under the thin jacket her body seemed stiff and unyielding as he took her downstairs and helped her into his car. Not until they were under way did she speak.

"It was my fault," she said hollowly.

"That young Estey shot him?" Standish said to lead her on.

"Ralph didn't shoot him." She sat up, and for the first time a trace of color showed in her cheeks. "He couldn't do a thing like that. Never."

"He had a gun."

"I know, but—"

"Then how was it your fault?"

"I shouldn't have made dates with Ralph or let him know how much I liked him. I knew George Fleming was cruel and mean. Most men will leave you alone once you show them you dislike them, but George persisted. He came to the club every night and waited until it closed so he could take me home. I should have settled it with George before I paid any attention to Ralph."

"But he was so different. Not like most of them who leer at you, and make passes, and nasty cracks when you brush them off, Ralph wanted me to quit my job. He was in love with me. I told him about

George, but he said he could handle that." She put her head down, her voice small. "Only, he couldn't."

"It isn't your fault Estey had the gun."

"Oh, yes. In a way it is. After they had that fight Ralph said George would never beat him up again. He had this gun in his office and he said he was going to carry it, and I encouraged him. I knew George was a bully, but I thought he was a coward, too."

"If Estey is innocent why should the police have to chase him now?"

"I don't know." She caught her breath in a half sob. "Unless he went up there and found George already dead and—got panicky when he saw how it would look."

Standish gave her a few seconds of silence and then began gently to question her about herself. In this he was effective, because presently she was talking fast, the words tumbling out, as though this was a release too long denied her.

He found out that she lived only two blocks from his apartment and garaged her car in the same place he did. He discovered that she came from some small town in Ohio, that she was twenty-one, that she had aspirations toward the stage

and had, in fact, put in two years in summer stock. She had not given up hope, in spite of her lack of success, and was, in fact, working as a combination hat-check-and-cigarette girl because she could make more money that way than any other way she knew. With her savings she had, until she met Ralph Estey, intended to try again on Broadway.

He glanced at her from time to time as she continued, and while the doctor in him realized that his therapy had cured for a time the threatened hysteria, the man in him became aware of her physical attractiveness. He had accepted the fact that her tall lithe slenderness was neatly rounded, that she had nice hands and ankles; now he knew that while her cheekbones were too prominent to class her face as pretty, her mouth was soft and full and her eyes, large and green and just faintly upward slanting under rather heavy brows, were striking. Remembering what Ballard had said earlier, he agreed that she could, given the proper circumstances, be a girl whom men would quarrel over.

That she seemed entirely unaware of this did not lessen her appeal, and now, as he approached his office, he said he would like to stop a moment before taking her home.

Mary Hayward was working on the doctor's books when he ushered Sylvia Keith into his office. She acknowledged the introduction coolly and, because it was not Standish's custom to bring good-looking young women into his office, eyed them both with some suspicion as the doctor seated the girl and turned to his medicine cabinet. She watched him shake two pills into the palm of his hand and get a glass of water.

She said, "Mrs. Rupert called, Doctor. And the Kline boy's mother. I told them you'd stop and see them before office hours." She glanced at her watch. "It's ten minutes after twelve now."

Standish recognized the businesslike, peremptory tone. It was the sort of tone that Mary employed when she did not entirely approve of him. She used it when Lieutenant Ballard made what she thought were unwarranted demands on the doctor's time; she used it when she thought he was neglecting his private practice or slighting wealthy patients who had wealthy friends.

Because he understood her, the implied censure amused rather than annoyed Standish; for Mary Hayward was young—perhaps two years older than Sylvia Keith—and just as softly feminine and attractive after

hours as she was competent and efficient in her white uniform. Her hair was brown, with glints of copper in it when the light was right. Her eyes, brown like her hair, were wise and understanding. There was a sprinkling of freckles on the bridge of her nose and she had a clean fresh look about her that was as decorative as it was genuine.

"All right, Mary," he said. "I'll make the calls if you'll drive Miss Keith home. She's had a rather rough time with Lieutenant Ballard and she needs to relax."

"Ballard," Mary said, finding the word distasteful. "Oh, well, whatever you say, Doctor."

Standish handed Sylvia Keith a little envelope containing four more pills. "Take one of these when you get home," he said, "and lock the door and climb into bed. And don't worry too much about Ralph Estey."

He hesitated, wondering if he should tell this girl what he knew, then deciding he should. "You see, someone administered chloral hydrate—what they call knockout drops—to Fleming before he was shot, probably in a drink. There weren't any fingerprints to prove it, but—"

"In a drink?" The thick brows climbed and the green

eyes opened wide. "But"—she broke off and began again with quick excitement—"but that would prove it couldn't have been Ralph. He wouldn't have a drink with George. George wouldn't ask him. They hated each other."

She went on, elaborating the idea until Standish interrupted her.

"It's still only supposition," he reminded her, "but it gives us something to think about. Now you run along and do what the doctor ordered . . . There's just one thing more: If Estey should get in touch with you, I'd try to convince him to give himself up before the police find him. Have him phone me if he'd rather do it that way."

Dr. Standish's office hours were from 1:30 to 3:00, but it was twenty minutes of four before the last patient had been administered to and the office cleared. There had been no opportunity for Mary Hayward to discuss the business of Sylvia Keith, and because Standish did not want to go into the matter now he gave her an order, not as a friend but as a doctor to his nurse.

"Call Choate and Tremaine in the First National Bank Building," he said, "and tell Mr. Choate that Dr. Standish would

like to see him as soon as possible at my office in the morgue. Then call Mrs. Tremaine—you'll find her in the phone book—and Donald Tremaine."

Mary's mouth tightened and her voice was distant, business-like, disapproving. "Suppose I can't locate all of them."

"Do the best you can."

He got out fast then, stopping en route to pay a professional visit to an ailing patient and arriving at the morgue at 4:30. Here, on the second floor, was the official office of the medical examiner, a two-room suite no different from thousands of other small business enterprises, the larger, outer office occupied by a secretary and a clerk and featuring long rows of metal filing cabinets.

"Mrs. Tremaine and Mr. Choate are in your office," the secretary said. "Mary called to say she had been unable to locate Donald Tremaine."

Paul Standish had seen Evelyn Tremaine from a distance at the trial of George Fleming. He had remembered her as an attractive woman, but now, as he entered his private office and saw her sitting in one of the leather chairs, the word that came to him was *striking*. For she was a statuesque, high-breasted woman with jet-

black hair, creamy skin, and eyes that looked black under their carefully arched brows. Her hair was drawn back to a knot at the nape, giving her somehow a classic look that complemented the almost symmetric planes and angles of her face; a coldly beautiful face in repose, and yet one which to Standish seemed to promise warmth and mobility if one could find the proper stimuli.

At least, that was the impression he got in that first long moment of inspection before he glanced at Warren Choate and found him to be a prosperous-looking man in his middle forties, a vigorous, well-set-up fellow with good shoulders.

Standish thanked the two for coming. He walked behind his desk and said he supposed they were wondering why he wanted to see them, and Choate said as a matter of fact they were. Standish sat down and asked if Mr. Choate had read about the murder of George Fleming.

Mr. Choate had. Mr. Choate was also aware that this same George Fleming had run down his partner, and Mrs. Tremaine's husband, a few months ago.

"Have they found the man who killed Fleming yet?" he asked.

Standish said no, and then

adopted an attitude that was confidential but purposely accented with mild overtones of mystery and ambiguity.

"We"—he used the word because it sounded better—"are trying to clear up a few little things," he said. "Not officially as yet, but just to get the record straight. As I understand it you're now the sole owner of Choate and Tremaine."

Choate said that was correct, the partnership insurance having been paid over in equal parts to Mrs. Tremaine and to Tremaine's brother.

"But Donald Tremaine's half was not paid over in cash, was it?" Standish said. "I understood it was to be held, like his share of his father's estate, until Donald was thirty-five. Why? Didn't his brother trust him?"

"It wasn't the brother so much; it was the father." Choate glanced at Evelyn Tremaine. "It seems Donald got in a scrape when he was in college and the old man cracked down on him, kept him pretty much under the thumb right up until he died, I guess. Left half his estate to Donald but in trust, with Walter handling it. Apparently Walter made out his insurance the same way."

"Donald didn't resent it?"

"He may have."

Standish nodded again. "What's he like?"

"Donald?" Choate turned one hand over. "A nice enough guy. Quiet. Too quiet, maybe. A junior partner in a firm of accountants," he said, and mentioned the name.

"Did he have any money of his own?"

"A few thousand invested in stocks that he'd saved."

Standish considered this while he evaluated the cost of Choate's sharkskin suit. "He never married? No girls?"

"None that I know of." Choate grinned. "I guess he's a little shy."

Standish turned to the woman. He asked if she had received her money after her husband's death.

"The insurance part, yes. The rest of the estate is still in probate."

Standish digressed abruptly and spoke of the accident that killed her husband. "Sometimes," he said, "a long time after a thing like that has happened, a person will remember a detail or impression that escaped him earlier. I wonder if there was anything more you could tell me."

He watched her shake her head, saw her gaze drop. After a moment she took a deep breath. "No," she said. "Frankly, I've been trying my best to forget it."

Standish said he could

understand why. He said it was a miracle that she had escaped uninjured. "As I recall it," he added, "you fell, but the car did not actually touch you."

"I still don't know why," she said, her glance still averted. "All I'll ever remember is the lights of that car and the sound of the motor, and that frightful crash and the scream of brakes just as I fell to my knees. I thought I'd been hit until I looked up, and then—"

She broke off, shuddering, and Standish saw the convulsive movement in her throat.

Across the room Warren Choate coughed. "I still don't understand just why we're here, Doctor."

"I've been wondering," he said quietly, "if there was any connection between George Fleming and Walter Tremaine—if perhaps Tremaine's death was not accidental but premeditated."

Choate leaned quickly forward, his jaw tightening. "Premeditated? That's the silliest thing I ever heard of!"

"I'm merely considering that possibility."

"Nuts." Choate leaned back. He glanced at the woman, who sat wide-eyed and unmoving in her chair, her lips parted. "The court was satisfied and so was the insurance company."

"With a life policy and

double indemnity," Standish said, "it wouldn't matter to the insurance company whether death was homicidal or accidental."

"What is that—a hunch? Or have you got evidence?"

Standish was in a corner and he knew it. "One or two little things," he said, hedging.

"Such as what?"

"I'm not at liberty to say now."

Choate stood up suddenly, red-faced and grim. "I think I've had enough of this," he said. "I resent the imposition of being asked down here to listen to such nonsense, and I think I can speak for Mrs. Tremaine when I say that I don't believe any part of what you've said."

He stepped toward the woman as she rose. "If you have anything remotely resembling proof or any factual evidence we'll be glad to cooperate in any way we can. Until that time I'm sure Mrs. Tremaine would rather not discuss the matter here or anywhere else."

He opened the door, touched Evelyn Tremaine's arm gently as she preceded him, and followed her from the room.

Donald Tremaine occupied the second floor of a remodeled brownstone in a still desirable neighborhood. He had a high-

ball in his hand when he opened the door and he recognized Standish before the doctor could introduce himself.

"Oh, hello," he said. "It's Dr. Standish, isn't it? Come in, won't you? Let me get you a drink."

He led the way into a tastefully furnished living room and seemed a little hurt at Standish's refusal to join him. He waved toward one of the maroon-covered wing chairs which flanked the small fireplace and went over to turn off the 5:30 newscast on the table radio.

He was a nice-looking man, small-boned but well proportioned, with close-cropped curly hair and thin-rimmed spectacles which served to magnify slightly his blue eyes. His voice was affable and well modulated, and his formal manner was marked as he offered a silver cigarette box before he sat down with his highball.

"Is this an official visit, Doctor?" he asked. "I mean, does it have anything to do with this Fleming fellow who ran down my brother?" He indicated a folded newspaper on the coffee table.

"That's the way the police see it."

Tremaine adjusted his glasses. "Is there any doubt?"

Standish smiled. He said that theoretically there was always some doubt.

"Yes," Tremaine said, "I suppose that's true." He hesitated, reflectively. "You're not quite satisfied, is that it?"

Standish ducked that one and changed the subject. "I talked to Warren Choate and Mrs. Tremaine. They told me you'd never married."

"That's correct," Tremaine said agreeably. "Couldn't afford it."

"You'll be able to afford it once you're thirty-five."

"True enough. Things will be a bit different then." He smiled as he replied, taking no offense and remaining polite and unruffled as he finished his highball.

Standish went on pleasantly, saying that he understood Tremaine would receive \$200,000.

"About that," Tremaine said.

"Didn't you ever resent it? Having to wait until you were thirty-five before you could touch your half of the estate?"

"Certainly I resented it—not that it did any good." Tremaine glanced into his empty glass and stood up. "I need a small refill," he said. "Excuse me. Sure you won't join me?"

He disappeared through a doorway and Standish looked

about, noticing the tailored slipcovers, the half-dozen prints on the walls, the few antique tables and stands which rounded out the room. He selected a cigarette from the silver box, found he had no matches, and stood up to look for one. When he saw the small gold lighter on the mantel he picked it up and thumbed off the cap.

There was no wheel to spin but there was a tiny lever, which he pressed. Not until then did he realize that it was not a cigarette lighter but a miniature atomizer which sprayed not flame but perfume, a small cloud of which was immediately deposited on his hand and jacket cuff.

He replaced the gadget to rub the spray from his hand, the sweet, spicy odor beginning to clog his nostrils. He backed away from the mantel. After that he began to wonder what a feminine accessory of that kind was doing in the apartment of a shy and quiet man who had the reputation of having no girl friends.

Glancing up as Tremaine came back into the room with a fresh highball, he kept his distance, conscious of his perfumed condition but finding no sign that his host was aware of it. When Tremaine dropped into the wing chair, Standish walked over to the davenport.

"About this Fleming fellow," Tremaine said, still gracious. "Just what is it that bothers you about the police theory? Or"—his eyes smiled behind the glasses—"have you one of your own? You see, I'm interested, because the moment I read about Fleming it occurred to me that it was a coincidence that he should die as violently as my brother."

Standish studied his host with some amazement, wondering how he could continue to be so casually polite; then, going a step farther, wondering if possibly his attitude was but a pose.

"I haven't any theory at the moment," he said finally. "Call it idle speculation, based on the remote possibility that Fleming's murder was no coincidence, but instead was planned that way."

"Planned?" The smile vanished.

"I'm not a policeman," Standish said. "I don't think like a policeman. They think they know who killed Fleming and why, but I've discovered certain irregularities."

He leaned forward, got a whiff of his perfumed sleeve, and moved his arm. "Vehicular homicide is a tricky thing," he said. "Because of the circumstances and your brother's condition Fleming was let off

lightly. On the other hand, Fleming, from what I could learn about him, is the sort who could be hired for such a job if someone was clever enough to recognize the possibilities of a traffic murder and plan properly.

"For the sake of argument let's say someone did hire Fleming and paid him off. Suppose Fleming spent the money and then realized what a wonderful extortion setup he had. Under such circumstances the one who hired him might decide that another murder was the only way out."

He stood up, aware that Tremaine was watching him. "The reason I wanted to talk to you and your sister-in-law and Mr. Choate was to see if you might know of anything to support that hypothesis."

Tremaine put his glass aside and stood up, his smile fixed now, but still looking every inch the gentleman. "Very interesting," he said stiffly. "Very. And did you discover anything important?"

"Nothing definite." Standish's glance flicked to the atomizer on the mantel and moved on. "Except to verify the fact that each one of you is much better off financially since your brother's death."

It was nearly six when Paul

Standish reached his offices, and he was surprised to see Mary Hayward working over the monthly statements.

"Hey," he said, "you're working late."

"So are you," Mary said, not looking up.

Standish slipped off his jacket. He glanced at his work book and learned that he would have to make three house calls that evening, none of them urgent.

Then Mary spoke, "Are you going to tell me about it?"

"All right," he said, and proceeded to do so, because he liked to talk things over with her after the day's work was done. When he finished, Mary sighed audibly. "I was afraid of t," she said.

"Of what?"

"You know what. I knew when you brought that girl in here this morning and told her about the chloral hydrate that you would never let it go at that."

"What did you think of her, Mary?"

"Oh, she's all right. She told me what happened and how she felt, it was all her fault. I couldn't help feeling sorry for her." She got up and poured herself a drink. "I don't know what it is exactly, but she has something that's appealing about her."

Standish thought this over. He had felt this appeal himself, but it had seemed more of a physical thing and not a quality he thought a woman would notice. He pursued the thought in silence until he realized that Mary had sat up and was sniffing the air.

"Have you seen her since?" she asked sharply. "Is that where that perfume came from?" She watched Standish chuckle, her impatience mounting. "Or was it Mrs. Tremaine?"

Standish told her of the atomizer in Donald Tremaine's apartment. He said its presence did not exactly corroborate Warren Choate's statement that Tremaine had no girl friends.

But Mary was not to be put off. Once satisfied that the perfume incident was not important, she said, "I suppose if you insist on being medical examiner instead of building up your private practice you have to give it a certain amount of time. I can even understand it when Lieutenant Ballard sometimes comes to you for help. But this—well, I mean I don't understand your going around asking these people a lot of personal questions when it's really none of your business. Or is it?" she demanded.

"Technically, no," Standish had to admit. "It's just that I don't think Ballard has the

answer to that murder. At least, not all of it. If Fleming's death was a gang killing, no one would have bothered to give him chloral hydrate—Ballard admits that. Yet someone did. I can't see two men who hated each other like George Fleming and Ralph Estey having a drink together in Fleming's apartment."

"Have you found any connection between Fleming and Warren Choate, Donald Tremaine, or Mrs. Tremaine?"

"No."

"Then why—?"

"Because if—and I admit it's a big if—someone *did* hire Fleming to run down Walter Tremaine, then you *have* to consider one of them. The brother comes into two hundred thousand instead of fifty thousand when he's thirty-five. Mrs. Tremaine is now a fairly wealthy widow, and Choate is now the sole owner of a business that supported two men handsomely."

Mary took some of her drink. She sighed again. She remained unconvinced. "But all that is not your job," she said. "If you had any real evidence you'd go to Ballard, wouldn't you? But you haven't any evidence, and how can you hope to get any if the police can't?"

Standish had thought about

that. In general he agreed with Mary's logic. The trouble was, Ballard was convinced that Ralph Estey had done the job, and he was not, therefore, looking for evidence that did not support the premise.

"I could get Lee Cheney," he said.

Lee Cheney was a private detective. Standish had used him occasionally in the past when he needed additional investigation. There was, in fact, an item in the budget for just such expense and heretofore the results that Lee Cheney produced more than justified his fees.

"Cheney?" Mary said, her voice shocked. "Oh, no."

Standish eyed the floor, and his bony face looked tired. "If there's anything in my idea, Cheney'll unearth it," he said.

"But, Paul!" Mary took a breath, the use of his first name during office hours testifying to her agitation. "That sort of investigation doesn't belong in your department. Suppose you're wrong. You can't charge that expense to—"

"No," Standish interrupted. "I can't. If I'm wrong I'll have to pay Cheney out of my own pocket."

Mary put her empty glass down with a bang. "Why, of course," she said with heavy sarcasm. "By all means. With all

that money you make being medical examiner you can easily afford it." She stood up, hesitated, and now her eyes were concerned.

"Will you tell me one thing?" she asked. "Why? Is it that Keith girl? Are you doing it for her? Or just because you think the Estey boy is innocent? If he is, why did he run away?"

Standish considered the questions soberly, for they were sound questions and ones which he had heretofore been able to ignore.

He thought about Sylvia Keith. He thought of her pathetic hopelessness as she sat outside Ballard's office, the story she had told him in the car, and the sincerity of her conviction that the blame for what had happened was deservedly hers. In all honesty he could not tell to what extent his concern for her had influenced him, both as a doctor and as a man, and as he sought an answer, he considered the Estey boy the police were still looking for.

He stirred in his chair, his surroundings temporarily forgotten. Why, he asked himself, should there have been traces of chloral hydrate? Why? And in his search for an answer the words of Old Doc Lathrop came back to him.

"The truth always rings true," Lathrop had said, "but the appearance of truth varies widely."

And so it was now. Was it the truth that Ballard had, or only the appearance of truth? This was what bothered him, and it was as if one part of his brain, heeding Mary's warning, was telling him, "Let it go. These are prominent people you have been questioning. They can make trouble for you for overstepping your authority."

And then that other part of his mind adding, "Something is funny. It doesn't ring true. Maybe when the police find Ralph Estey and he tells his story you'll be satisfied. Until that time you've got to keep looking for the answer."

He shook his head as if to clear it, and turned to tell Mary how he felt. But Mary wasn't there. He had not heard her leave, but as he swiveled his chair the door of the dressing room opened and she stepped out, white uniform replaced by a lightweight beige suit. When Standish saw how smart and attractive she looked, he smiled cheerfully.

"Wait a minute, Mary," he said. "Let me call Cheney and then we'll go out and have dinner."

Mary shook her head, her

soft brown hair waving. "No," she said with quiet severity, as though detecting the spurious quality of his cheerfulness, "we won't have dinner. I have some things in the fridge for dinner; thank you just the same. Good night, Doctor."

Standish watched the door close, his disappointment showing and the tired lines working again on his face. He sighed heavily. Finally he swiveled back to his desk and began to jot things down on a pad. Then he lifted the telephone.

When Lee Cheney answered, Standish briefed him first in general terms. He mentioned the three people who interested him most and said he wanted to find out what they had been doing during the past several weeks, particularly in a social way. Who, of the opposite sex—if anyone—had Warren Choate, Evelyn, and Donald Tremaine been seeing lately? What did they do evenings?

"I'm interested in bank accounts, too," he said, and mentioned the date of Walter Tremaine's death. "Particularly the week before and the week after the accident."

The private detective, who had answered in grunts, found his voice. "What am I?" he asked plaintively. "Houdini? You can't get bank records without a subpoena."

"You can get the information confidentially if you're on the ball. Later, if we get anything, maybe we can get subpoenas. Anyway, do the best you can," he said, "and also see what you can find out about George Fleming's financial status the last three months."

Cheney's reply was unenthusiastic. "I'll need some help."

"Sure. Put a couple of men on it with you. And, Lee, I think I'd like a man to watch Donald Tremaine's place." He mentioned the address and described Tremaine. "I'd like to know if he has any callers. If he goes out, have him followed."

Cheney grunted. "Make it three men to help me," he said. "It'll cost you about a hundred bucks a day-plus expenses."

Paul Standish sat at his desk for some time after he hung up. He was never sure how long, but dusk was coating the windows when the shrilling of the telephone startled him. When he answered it, the voice of Lieutenant Ballard came to him, blunt and demanding.

"I'll pick you up in front of your office in three minutes, Doc," he said.

Ballard was on time. He was driving a city car and was alone. He had the car accelerating before Standish could shut the door.

"I told you we'd get Estey," he said.

Standish made no reply, because, at the speed they were traveling, he felt safer with the lieutenant's full attention on his driving. In front of a grimy, empty-windowed brick building, where three police cars stood, Ballard slammed on his brakes. Standish got out and started for the doorway. He reached the sidewalk before a hand grabbed his arm.

"Not in there, Doc," Ballard said, his voice flat. "Here." And then he was swiveling Standish toward a five-year-old sedan he hadn't noticed.

It stood between two of the police cars, its windows down, and somehow Standish found himself looking in at the stiff distorted body, the torso of which lay flat along the seat, an ugly stain discoloring one side of the gray face and serving to obscure the tiny hole in the temple and the powder burns which rimmed it.

He opened the door and leaned inside, his practiced fingers moving automatically. Then he asked about the gun.

"It was under him," Ballard said. "The slug went through his head and stuck in here." He indicated the upholstered frame piece between the doors. "A .32 automatic," he said, "and ballistics is already checking it,

not that there's much doubt that it's the same one that killed Fleming. How long's he been dead?"

"Probably more than twelve hours. How much longer, I don't know."

"Sure," Ballard said. "Did it last night. Ran out after he shot Fleming, rode around while he figured out the score, and took the easy way out sometime during the night. How close would you say the gun was held?"

"Inches, probably. It's not a contact wound."

Ballard was satisfied. He admitted the department had slipped up because they hadn't known that Estey had a car, explaining that it had first been noticed early that morning but hadn't been closely inspected because there was nothing suspicious about it. Only when a curious policeman finally looked inside was the discovery made.

He said other things, but Standish did not hear him. His gaze remained fixed on the body of Ralph Estey, in life a stocky man who might have been in his middle twenties, with unruly brown hair and a broad bony face. Something beyond the presence of death left him oddly shaken and upset inside.

The physical facts of suicide

were plain. And yet, even as he accepted them, one small part of his mind remained doggedly unconvinced. No matter how he argued with himself, he still had no explanation for the chloral hydrate which had been found in Fleming's body. The trouble was that now this lone, contrary fact was no longer enough.

The doctor had no time for extracurricular investigations until late afternoon of the next day. He was busy that morning with the post-mortem, which served only to substantiate the suicide verdict; his office patients came in greater numbers than usual, and after that he had to make bedside visits.

When he returned to the office sometime after four o'clock, Lee Cheney was waiting in the anteroom, a smallish, sharp-nosed man of indeterminate age.

The details that he and his men had uncovered were many and varied. Out of them certain discoveries loomed as important. The first was that Warren Choate, a widower, had been quietly dining a woman in black during the past several weeks.

"A brunette," Cheney added, "who always wears a hat with a half veil. Nobody knows her name."

"How often?"

"It's hard to say, but it's always the same dame."

"Good enough," Standish said. "Now, what about Mrs. Tremaine?"

"We kind of drew a blank there." Cheney glanced at his cigarette, which was down to the last half inch, and rubbed it out in a tray. "Stays home a lot, shops by phone mostly. Goes out sometimes in the evening. The neighbors see her leaving around seven or so; they don't always see her come back."

Standish's gaze moved beyond Cheney and stayed there, while a spark of excitement began to glow inside him. "What about Donald Tremaine?"

"Well, we had a better break there." Cheney leaned back, looking a little pleased with himself. "You know the place he lives? Small. One apartment to the floor. The owner has the ground-floor flat and he's not only nosy, he has insomnia. It seems," Cheney said, "that Donald has a lady friend who calls once a week, after dark. Generally around nine. The landlord figures she leaves plenty late, because he never sees her go. Except last night."

"Ah-h." The excitement mushroomed in Standish. "A brunette?"

"Yep. Generally shows on

Mondays, but she was there last night. For about an hour."

Standish came to instant attention.

"Did you put a man on that house, as I told you?"

A grin touched Cheney's eyes. "Yep," he said. "And the guy took a chance. He followed her when she left. A brunette with dark glasses, a good-sized woman with a little veil. Do I have to tell you where she went?"

"To the Tremaine house."

"Right." Cheney crossed his legs and made a comment not in his notes. "It sort of looks," he said, "like our brunette was giving both the boys a play, hunh?"

It took Paul Standish a while to digest what he had heard and to finish with his speculation. Only then was he ready for further information.

"What about the banks?"

"There, too," said Cheney, "I get a break. I start at the National because Choate has offices in the building. All three of them got accounts. I did a little job for the National once, and the cashier is friendly so long as I tell him it's confidential and a personal favor."

He consulted his notes and said, "With Choate we're nowhere. His account is too big and too active to show anything

special around that date you're interested in. Mrs. Tremaine has had a small account for some time, with an average monthly balance of about three hundred. No sizable deposits or withdrawals until two weeks ago, when I guess the insurance company paid off."

"Donald Tremaine?"

"About the same picture."

Standish considered the information and found it disappointing. "What about George Fleming?"

"No bank account that I could find. Hoods like him never bother with banks."

Cheney put his papers away and said, "But maybe this helps, Doc: Fleming was small-time. Until recently. In the past three months he's bought a new model used car for twenty-seven hundred bucks—cash—and a lot of new suits, and he's been giving the ponies a big play without doing much collecting." He stood up: "I guess that's about it."

Standish remained where he was and glumly watched the little detective go. Keeping his thoughts on the financial information he now had, he realized that only in Fleming had he any support for his theory. Fleming had come into money; he could have been hired to run down Walter Tremaine. But by whom?

Warren Choate had the motive and the money, but there was no proof that he had used his money in such a way. Evelyn Tremaine apparently did not even have the cash to pay for such a job at that time—unless she had made a deal with Fleming on credit, which was highly unlikely—and neither did Donald Tremaine. Unless—

He stood up abruptly as the thought hit him, the spark of excitement glowing brightly once again. When he went into the inner office and found Mary Hayward at her desk, he told her he was on his way to see Warren Choate and should be back in less than a half hour.

Most of the office help at Choate & Tremaine had left by the time Standish got there, but the door was unlocked and he went on in, to find Warren Choate just ~~cleaning up~~ his desk. This time the man's face was truculent and stony.

"No," he said when Standish had made his request. "Not a chance."

"But Donald Tremaine does have an account here?"

"That I will answer for you—yes. The rest of it—" He did not finish, but put his hands on the desk and leaned stiff-armed over it. "I told you yesterday I'd cooperate if you had evidence to support your

theory; today I understand the police are satisfied that Estey killed Fleming and then shot himself. Under the circumstances if you want to see the records of our clients you'd better get yourself a subpoena, Doctor."

Standish met the rebuff without rancor. His voice remained even, confident, explicit, even though what he said was mostly bluff.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Choate." Standish sat on the arm of a chair and took his time. "From information I now have I'm still inclined to doubt that Walter Tremaine's death was accidental. I'd prefer to conduct my investigation quietly, but if you insist, I'll go to the police with what I have. I think they can get a subpoena, but the minute they do the newspapers will have it. If you want that publicity now—"

He rose, straightened his jacket, and was almost to the door.

"Just a minute."

Standish stopped.

Choate eyed him with cold resentment, but there was a trace of uncertainty in his voice. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what you bought or sold for Donald Tremaine during the month of June."

Choate hesitated, glanced away. Finally he straightened his shoulders, then started around the desk, saying he would check the records.

Standish walked over to the window, aware now of the strain he felt and grinning a little in his relief. He wiped his palms with his handkerchief and was waiting with calm assurance when Choate returned, a worried look on his face.

"He sold a hundred shares of American Factories on June 14 at 50 $\frac{3}{4}$ ."

"That would amount to something over five thousand," Standish said. "Did you credit his account or give him a check?"

"He wanted a check."

"And cashed it?"

"Certainly he cashed it."

Standish said, "Ah-h!" silently as a surge of satisfaction came over him. Aloud he said, "Thank you very much, Mr. Choate."

It was after five when Paul Standish got back to his office from his round of calls, to find Evelyn Tremaine in the ante-room talking to Mary. Apparently the woman had just arrived, since both were standing, and Mary said, "Here he is."

Evelyn Tremaine examined

him with humid dark eyes as he said good afternoon and put aside his bag. She wore a smooth-fitting navy dress with a tiny jacket, over the arm of which three stone martens dangled, and the impression she gave was expensive, superior, poised, and impatient. Yet even as he heard her throaty voice asking to see him in private he thought of other things and wondered what this woman would be like once the veneer—and he thought it was a veneer—of aloofness was stripped away.

He motioned her toward the surgery and opened the door, nodding to Mary and the interoffice communicator on her desk. Once inside, he surreptitiously flicked the switch on his instrument and asked the woman to be seated.

Evelyn Tremaine began by stating frankly that she had come to make a threat. She was aware, she said, of the inquiries he had made of her brother-in-law and Warren Choate; furthermore, the insinuation he had made the day before had so upset her that she had consulted her attorney, who had assured her that Dr. Standish had neither the authority nor the legal right to undertake such an investigation. She said that if he persisted in such unwarranted insinuations

she and the others involved would see that the matter was placed before the proper authorities.

Standish let her finish, knowing that she had reasonable grounds for her promised action, even as his mind went on to other things. He said he would like to ask a question.

"You went to see Donald Tremaine last night, I believe?"

Something flickered in the dark depths of her eyes and was gone. "Perhaps."

"You've visited him at his place other times as well."

Again something happened to her eyes, but the look was veiled before he could fathom it. She flicked a piece of lint off her dress, and when she glanced up her smile was studied.

"Visited Donald?" she said with mild hauteur. "Since my husband's death? Don't be ridiculous, Doctor."

"She'll do it, Paul," Mary said, after Mrs. Tremaine had left. "She'll make trouble for you."

Standish's smile was slow and understanding, because he sensed her anxiety and knew her concern was for him. He told her what he had learned from Lee Cheney.

"There's something funny somewhere, Mary," he said.

"But even if you're right, if someone did hire Fleming to

run down Mr. Tremaine, you haven't any proof. It couldn't have been Mrs. Tremaine. She didn't have any money."

"She could have been in with someone—either Choate or the brother. She wasn't hurt, remember. Just a little push to a drunken husband at the right time—"

Mary uttered a small distracted cry. "But—it seems so horrible."

"Choate had the money—Donald Tremaine cashed a check for five thousand and made no deposit. This was three days before his brother was killed. What did he do with it?"

"But if you're wrong—you could be, couldn't you?—and they make a formal complaint

... Suppose there is an official investigation and they remove you from office. Think what it would do to your practice."

Standish swallowed an incipient thickness which had begun working at his throat. "It's a chance I have to take," he said finally. "At least, for a little while longer."

The Club Neilan was not one of the city's best, but it was popular, largely because of its excellent orchestra and moderate minimum. The cloakroom was in the little foyer just off the street, and when Paul Standish walked in that night at

10:30 he was not sure just why he had come.

Originally, his decision had been based on the desire to offer Sylvia Keith his sympathy and tell her he was not yet satisfied with the suicide theory; now that he was here he wondered if this was but an excuse to talk to her, to know her.

She stood in the little cubby with another girl, both dressed in dark, low-cut frocks trimmed with white, and the instant she saw him her upward-slanting eyes beamed their recognition and she did the best she could with a smile. She opened the hinged counter and stepped out. She shook hands before she took his hat and passed it to her companion.

She said, "I'm glad you came."

Standish asked if they could sit down for a few minutes, and she said yes, and spoke to the other girl. Then she was leading him into the front room by the bar, where there were some tables for those who were unimpressed by the inner room with its dance floor and orchestra.

When they were seated and he had ordered, he asked if she was sure this was not against the rules, and she reassured him, adding that she was breaking in another girl.

"I'm quitting when I can," she said. "I couldn't stand it, working in a place like this after what happened to Ralph."

Standish said he understood. He told her a little about what he had been doing, and as he talked he realized how thin and drawn her face seemed now, the high cheekbones and the hollows beneath them serving to accent the fullness of her mouth. In the subdued light her blonde hair was fine-textured and clean, the tawny skin smooth and only lightly touched by cosmetics.

"Did George Fleming seem to have plenty of money?" he asked.

"Why, yes." She glanced up. "He had a nice car and—yes, I think he did."

Without mentioning any names, Standish spoke of the \$5000 that Donald Tremaine had received but had not deposited. "There's a chance," he said, "that maybe we can make two and two equal four."

He saw her lips work and grow still. She took a quick breath, her breasts tightening against the fabric of her dress. Then she looked right at him, leaning closer so that he could see only the intriguing depths of her green eyes.

"You think this person paid George five thousand dollars to—"

"To run down Walter Tremaire," Standish finished. "I think the accident was framed. I think maybe George was running out of money and decided he could get more. Maybe the one who hired him recognized the perpetual threat and decided to do something about it.

"That would explain the chloral hydrate, but shooting Fleming like that would not be quite enough. The killer had to be sure he would never be blamed; he needed another frame as clever as the first one, because that's the way his mind worked."

He took a breath and said, "In his talks with Fleming he found out about the trouble Fleming was having with Estey. He might even have made a date with Estey and gone directly there after he finished with Fleming. Somehow, by trickery or at the point of a gun, he got Estey into the car and made him drive down by the waterfront."

He paused, not wanting to speak of details. "When it was over, he left the gun and took Estey's, so the only obvious conclusion would be the one the police accepted."

She had been watching him, wide-eyed and intent; now she leaned back, with a small sigh. "Yes," she breathed. "It must

have been that way. Ralph never could have done a thing like that and"—she paused and her glance met his—"you're going to try to prove it?"

Standish said he had to try. For another second or two he eyed her with approval; then all at once he was embarrassed, because he knew he had no right to look at her like that.

He signaled the waiter and paid the check. He was still a little embarrassed when he shook hands with her in the foyer and heard her expression of gratitude.

It had been cloudy earlier in the evening, and by ignoring the threat of rain Paul Standish found himself caught without a coat as he stepped out on a sidewalk that was slick and black and wet. His car was parked nearly a block away, and though it was not raining hard it rained steadily and there was nothing to do but run for it.

He piled into the car and slammed the door, found the seat wet from an open window and rolled the window up. He dug his keys out of his pocket, got the windshield wiper working, finally jockeyed his way clear of the parking space. It took him eight minutes to drive to the row of garages in an alley a block or so from his apartment, and when he had

locked up he felt his way through the darkness to the street.

He turned right here, turned at the corner, hugging the walls of the building to keep the rain off. His own place was two-thirds of the way down the block, and he walked along, bag in hand, as the shadows thickened. There were few windows lighted here and no sound, except, somewhere up ahead, the low, pushing throb of an idling motor.

Standish never knew what made him glance up, what made him stop so unaccountably just before he reached the glass doors of the apartment house. He was hurrying. His chin was tucked down against the rain. The sound of the motor meant nothing. Yet something, some inner compulsion, made him look up and stop short.

Opposite the entrance and diagonally twenty-five feet away stood this small coupé with the idling motor, the right-hand window rolled down and framing darkly a shadowed figure. Standish could not see it clearly. He was aware of a turned-up collar, a snap-brim felt hat hiding a half-seen face, the combined impression vague, because what caught his eye was the metallic glint of a gun.

All this took but a fraction of a second. As he stiffened, the

gun hammered, and he saw the muzzle flash and felt the lash of chips from the brick wall ahead and above him. Then he was down, half diving, sprawling flat in the angle of the building and pulling his head behind his doctor's bag while the gun roared twice again in succession.

Taut-muscled and immobile, he shrank there until he heard the motor accelerate, heard the whine of gears. He peered out cautiously as the coupé whipped into the street with lights out and license obscured.

He did not bother to look about him then, because he heard windows going up along the street as the curious sought answers for the shots. Ducking quickly into the entrance, he rode to his fourth-floor apartment, conscious now of the tremor in his legs as reaction began its work.

Inside, he put aside his bag and saw that his clothes were wetly stained but not torn. The palms of his trembling hands were black, and he went into the kitchen to wash them.

He was not sure when the trembling stopped. He made himself a quick drink, and as he carried it back to the living room he discovered he was whistling softly. This so amazed him that he wondered why, and then he knew, and found the

answer oddly satisfying. Someone was badly scared.

Paul Standish called Lieutenant Ballard from his apartment the next morning because he did not want Mary to know about last night's murder attempt, and it was a glum and noncommittal Ballard who listened to the story and examined the three scars in the apartment-house front, the worthless fragment or two from the bullets.

A calmer appraisal of Ballard's attitude should have told Standish that Ballard was troubled by what had happened, that his glumness arose from his inability to explain the incident, that he was all too aware that it was no longer possible to brush aside the doctor's theory.

When he neglected to say so, Standish needled him. "This one you can't hang on young Estey."

Ballard eyed him fretfully. "Okay; so who do we hang it on?"

Standish shrugged. "I told you what I thought in your office the other day."

"I remember. You had the idea somebody hired Fleming to run down Walter Tremaine, and because Fleming got greedy this somebody fed him chloral hydrate and then shot him.

Does that mean you think either the widow, the brother, or this broker guy, Choate, killed both Fleming and Estey and took some shots at you?"

"That's exactly what I mean. And what I want to know now is: Are you going to follow it up?"

"Sure," Ballard said. "Sure, Doc, I'd like to talk it over with the D.A. first, but—sure, we'll get right after it."

But for all his words there was no enthusiasm in Ballard's manner as he turned away, and Standish was still annoyed with his friend when he went back upstairs, to find the telephone ringing. The voice that answered his hello belonged to Lee Cheney.

"I don't know if this is important," the little detective said, "but Donald Tremaine stopped in the air terminal on his way to work this morning. He wanted to know about flight times to Miami. He didn't buy tickets."

Standish considered this with interest, and a thoughtful smile touched the corners of his eyes. "Did he go to work?"

"Sure."

"Have you got some keys that might get me into his flat?"

"Yeah," Cheney said, with some hesitation. "But don't expect me to go with you."

You'll be sticking your neck all the way out to here."

"I know," Standish said. "You don't have to go. Just bring the keys right over, will you?"

With the help of Cheney's keys Standish had no trouble getting into Tremaine's apartment, and the first thing he glanced at was the mantelpiece where the perfume atomizer had stood. He found it presently in the bathroom medicine cabinet, but first he looked over the neat, well-furnished living room, the equally neat bedroom with its maple twin beds, one of which had not been made.

In coming here he had no particular goal in mind; he did not know exactly what he was looking for. He was, in fact, just looking in the hope that he could find something that would help substantiate the pattern he had in mind, and until he reached the bathroom his search was singularly unproductive.

Here there was a double-size cabinet with two doors. The one on the right was crammed with a man's toilet articles, medicines, prescriptions; the left-hand one had been devoted to feminine use.

The atomizer was there; so were a lot of bottles, jars, and tubes of beauty aids and

preparations. Standish eyed them all with new interest and satisfaction as he recalled his visit to Donald Tremaine, the quiet, neat, and self-effacing man who, according to reports, had no girl friends.

Closing his mind to further speculation, Standish stepped back and looked about the room, inspecting the towels, shower curtain, bath mat. There was a wicker receptacle in one corner, and he glanced at it only as a matter of course until he noticed a strand of black hair which had become tangled in the woven surface. On closer inspection he found an even longer strand, and now he took an envelope from his bag, carefully untangled the hairs, and deposited them inside.

Then, on impulse, he emptied a zipper case he carried in the bag, found a pair of forceps, and lifted each and every article from the left-hand cabinet and put them in the case. This done, he left the apartment just as fast as he could.

Still with no blueprinted plan in mind, but working on the theory that the more information he had—regardless of how inconsequential it seemed—the better, he drove first to the morgue and went up to the city chemist's laboratory on the second floor, a large room of benches, tables, and

cabinets cluttered with tools of the trade. The chemist, a short, balding man with glasses, listened to Standish, accepted the envelope with the two hairs, and said he'd see what he could do.

"I'll phone you this afternoon," Standish said, and then went back to his car and drove to police headquarters, where he located a friend of his in the crime laboratory.

"See if you can find any prints, Eddie," he said, and dumped the contents of the zipper case on a workbench. "There should be something here you can use."

"What do I do if I get a couple of good ones?" Eddie asked.

"I don't know. I'll call you."

Until nearly four o'clock Paul Standish was busy with the practice of medicine. When the last office patient had been administered to, he told Mary to lock the outer door, and then picked up the telephone.

The city chemist had information and Standish said, "Yes . . . Yeah." Then, with a quickened cadence, "Dyed? Full length. Good. Just hang onto it—and thanks."

When the connection was broken he dialed another number and had words with Eddie in the crime laboratory.

"What luck?"

"A nice neat thumb-left hand—and a right index," Eddie said. "So what comes now?"

Standish took his time answering, phrased his reply with deliberation. Mary came back into the room as he finished, but when she made no comment he dialed once more and found Lee Cheney at his office.

"Have you still got a man on Donald Tremaine?"

"No," Cheney said.

"Put one on his apartment. Call everything else off before my bill gets too big, Lee, but I want the apartment watched. If our blonde shows up, have your man phone me at once. I'll be here waiting."

"For how long? What makes you think she'll show at all?"

"Because," Standish said, "I think time is running out. If I'm wrong, if she doesn't come before midnight, have your man call me anyway."

Mary had been listening as she straightened up the surgery, and now she sat down at her desk. "I take it," she said with some asperity, "that you've stopped being a doctor until midnight. Suppose someone calls?"

"You'll answer the phone," Standish said. "Refer any calls to Dr. Young, just as you do when I'm out of town."

Mary sighed her exasper-

ation. She powdered her nose, slammed a couple of drawers, finally sat back, her color high and sparks in her brown eyes. "What're you going to do if the brunette does come?"

"Pay her a little call." Standish roused himself and glanced at his watch. "It's after five," he said. "Why don't you run along?"

"How will you eat?"

"You could get me a sandwich before you leave."

She said nothing to this for a while. She answered the telephone and referred a patient to Dr. Young. Twenty minutes later she rose and went into the dressing room. When she had changed she left the office without a word. While she was gone the telephone shrilled again, but this time it was not a patient but Eddie, at headquarters, with another report.

When Mary came back she carried three brown-paper bags. From the first she produced two sandwiches which she put on Standish's desk; from the second she took two large cartons of coffee; from the third came two fresh pears and a bunch of seedless grapes.

Standish examined the food. He looked at Mary and when he smiled much of his tiredness went away. "So," he said, "you won't go home."

"No."

Standish eyed her fondly. "Let's eat," he said. "I'm hungry."

"Me, too," Mary said. "I hope you like grapes."

And so they ate and made the coffee last as long as they could and smoked cigarettes and turned on the office radio. They said very little and both seemed conscious of the desk clock, which crept with discouraging slowness to 8:00, to 8:30, to 9:00. Finally, with an explosion of sound that startled them both, the telephone rang.

The doctor did not recognize the voice which came to him, but the message was clear. "Stay there!" Standish said. "I'm on my way."

The man came from the shadows diagonally across the street as Standish parked his car a hundred feet beyond the brownstone where Donald Tremaine lived. He said the brunette was still up there and did Standish need any further help. Standish said no, and when the man moved off he turned to Mary.

"If you want to do something you might phone Ballard. There's a drug store back on the corner." He slid from behind the wheel. "Tell him where I am, and when he gets here he can wait, or he can come up, whichever he likes."

Mary did not like it; her voice said so. "And what will you be doing?"

Standish was not quite sure as he moved off in the darkness without bothering to reply. He had an idea that he could get more information out of Tremaine than Ballard could officially, and having come this far practically alone, he had to try. He told himself this as he stood on the second-floor landing and knocked at Tremaine's door, then knocked again, while the tension began to build slowly inside him.

It was a good ten seconds before there was a reply, and then a man's voice said, "Yes? Who is it?"

"Dr. Standish."

Another ten seconds went by. Finally a lock clicked and the door opened about a foot, framing Tremaine's bespectacled face. "I'm sorry, Doctor," he said in his formal way. "I have company."

"I know. That's what I want to talk to you about."

And then Standish made his move putting his weight against the door, swiftly and with precision before Tremaine realized what was happening, forcing the smaller man back, then pushing on into an empty room.

He heard the door, slam behind him as he continued on,

and then, suddenly, Tremaine had darted ahead of him. What happened then was not in the doctor's script. For while the man who confronted him was still impeccably groomed, the jaw was hard and the mouth was white with rage.

"You can't come in here like this," he yelled. "Not even the police can come in here without a warrant."

And then, having spoken, he swung. It was not an artful blow, but it was unexpected and he gave it all he had. Standish saw it coming and had time to jerk his head, not quite enough, but enough to vitiate its force.

As it was, the punch grazed his cheekbone and he went back a step, and Tremaine was after him, swinging the left. The trouble was, Standish had done some boxing in college and Tremaine apparently had not, and now the left was neatly slipped and Standish was inside, trapping the arm and shifting his weight.

He did not strike Tremaine; he merely spun him off his feet and dumped him against the edge of the divan, from which he bounced to the floor.

It was Tremaine's eyes which gave the show away; for even as he sat there they darted beyond Standish, so that the doctor had time to wheel, to spot the

fleeing woman before she reached the door. She had come from the inner hallway, dressed in black, a tall brunette with dark glasses, and as Standish leaped after her she was tugging at the door and getting it open and driving through.

He caught her arm as she reached the hall and yanked her back, slamming the door with his free hand. For a second she pitted her strength against his, and then she clawed at him and swung her handbag, which hit his shoulder hard and bounced into a chair.

Then Standish reached for that black hair, and it came free in his grasp, tangling with the dark glasses, so that they came free, too. What he saw then was not brunette. This woman was blonde with blazing green eyes and a white twisted face.

It was Sylvia Keith.

Standish stepped back, breathing hard, but feeling no surprise. He recovered the black wig and the glasses, put them into his pocket. He watched the girl straighten her features and then her dress. She was still breathing spasmodically, and her red mouth was a tight, hard line.

All this took perhaps five seconds and during that time no one said a word. Then Tremaine jumped up and gave vent to his feelings. He said he'd have

Standish arrested; he'd have his license revoked. He said a lot of other things and Standish heard him out.

"If I were you," Standish said when it was all over, "I'd do some listening."

"I'll call the police," Tremaine said, and when Standish said he wished he would, Tremaine started for the telephone. He took two steps before Sylvia Keith's voice stopped him.

"Wait a minute, Don!" The voice was clipped, venomous. "Let him talk."

Tremaine hesitated, wavered, obeyed. Standish glanced again at Sylvia, and only when he remembered that she had once been an actress of sorts could he accept the fact that this hard-eyed, ruthless woman and the girl he had tried to help and had talked to only the night before were one and the same.

He sat down and looked at Tremaine. "I guess you're in love with her."

"Certainly I'm in love with her."

"Since before your brother was killed . . . Then why didn't you marry her? Because your brother, who apparently dominated you the same way your father did, might make trouble?"

The rage in Tremaine had passed. What anger remained

was now under control, and his resentment showed only in the overtones of his accented voice. "What business is it of yours?"

"Only this," Standish said. "Unless you've got a very good story to tell the police you'll probably face murder charges; at the least, you'll wind up as an accessory."

Tremaine leaned forward, jaw slack and widely staring. Before he could speak, Standish continued, his voice quiet, assured, intent. He reminded Tremaine of their previous talk and the doubt he had expressed about Walter Tremaine's accidental death. He outlined the theory again, adding that it was no longer theory but a fact.

Then, quickly, he said, "You got a check for five thousand dollars from Warren Choate in June."

"He sold some stock for me."

"That check was not deposited; it was cashed . . . What did you do with it?" He pressed when Tremaine did not reply. "Who did you give it to?"

"Why"—Tremaine's glance shifted behind the spectacles, came back—"to Sylvia."

"In cash?"

"She wanted cash."

"Why?"

"To pay off a mortgage on her mother's home. She supported her mother—out in

Ohio. She said she couldn't marry me with that mortgage over her head."

Standish let his breath out slowly. Something about the other's manner, his almost naïve sincerity, told him that this must be the truth.

"A mortgage?" he said. "Well, that we can check. Now let me tell you what I think she did with that five thousand. She gave it to George Fleming," he said, and went on hurriedly to tell what he had learned from Ballard and Lee Cheney about the man. "Fleming was for hire if the price was right and the risk reasonable and"—he nodded toward the girl—"she knew it."

He said, "She wouldn't marry you while your brother was alive, would she? What did she tell you? That she wanted to wait until you were thirty-five and you received your inheritance and were your own man for a change? Whatever her excuse, she found out from you that your brother had an insurance policy which paid double in case of accidental death. And she could add. A man with two hundred thousand was better for her than a man with fifty."

"For all I know she may have planned to have Mrs. Tremaine killed at the same time her husband was; that

would net you about double the two hundred thousand. If she did, Fleming missed the woman, and anyway it doesn't matter now."

Tremaine wet his lips. He shook his head, his eyes incredulous. "You are saying that Sylvia hired Fleming to kill my brother?" he asked in hushed tones.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. She paid Fleming your five thousand and Fleming did the job. My testimony about your brother's drunken condition helped get Fleming off. The trouble was, Fleming fell for Sylvia, too, and when she gave him no time he got suspicious. In the beginning I think she convinced him that she was acting for somebody else. Later, when his money began to run out, I think he may have followed her here one Monday night.

"After that he knew why she wanted your brother killed accidentally. She was going to collect when she married you after your thirty-fifth birthday, and Fleming was on a spot to do some collecting himself. When he told her so, she knew she had to kill him or he'd bleed her to death."

He stopped abruptly, held by some new change in Tremaine. Tremaine's gaze had shifted and his bespectacled

eyes had a funny expression. He said, "*No, Sylvia!*" and there was something in the cadence of that voice that made the hairs stir on the back of Standish's neck.

He turned slowly. He looked at Sylvia Keith. Then he saw the open handbag, the automatic pointed right at him. The sight of it jolted him and he forced his glance up while he swallowed and disciplined his mind.

"That's Estey's gun, isn't it? You had to take it after you'd shot him with the gun you used on Fleming." He paused as a new thought came to him. "Estey had a permit to carry a gun and the number is on that permit. The police will be glad to get that gun. What did you do with it that first night when you knew you'd be picked up?"

"Checked it in a locker at the bus terminal."

"And went back and got it the next day. I guess you kept it handy, just in case. You had it close last night, didn't you?"

He turned back to Tremaine, not waiting for a reply. He told what had happened. "It had only been raining a short time," he said, "and when that coupé pulled away I noticed the pavement was wet and shiny where it had stood opposite the entrance. If it had been parked there long, if someone had been

waiting for me, a part of that pavement would have been dry. Last night I thought someone—I was thinking of you at the time—had followed me home."

Nothing had changed in Tremaine's face and Standish turned back to the girl.

"You knew who I suspected when I told you about the five thousand dollars," he said. "You knew if I questioned him"—he indicated Tremaine—"the truth would come out, and then there would be no marriage for you and no two hundred thousand. No matter what you had to stop me, and you tried."

He fashioned a mirthless smile but his glance was watchful. "The minute I left the club you grabbed a customer's hat and coat and your bag—or was the gun in the car?—gave your assistant some excuse and said you'd be back in a few minutes. You didn't have to follow me. You were the only one who knew where I garaged the car. All you had to do was wait out front of the apartment. With that hat and coat on I thought it was a man."

She made no comment to all this. Nothing changed in her face. The gun remained steady.

Standish swallowed again, feeling the perspiration start and the dampness growing in

his palms. He looked at Tremaine. He said, "Do you want to hear the rest of it?" but the other continued to stare at the girl with shocked and unbelieving eyes.

"She thought she had to kill Fleming." Standish raised his voice but still Tremaine would not look at him. "She had to do it so she wouldn't be suspected, and she was as clever there as she was in planning that accident. There happened to be a young lad named Estey who had been mooning around her, and all he needed was a little encouragement and his infatuation was complete. She knew Fleming, knew what would happen. It wasn't hard to arrange that fight before witnesses, to suggest that Estey ought to carry a gun to protect himself—and her."

He said, "She went to Fleming's place with a paper of chloral hydrate. They had a drink together and she gave him the drug, and when it started to work she cleaned up, so there would be no trace of those drinks. She didn't forget the paper that contained the drug, either; she just happened to miss the wastebasket with it and I happened to get curious about it."

Sylvia cleared her throat. "You're crazy, Doc," she said. "Why would I bother with

chloral hydrate if I was going to shoot him?"

"My guess is that you weren't very handy with a gun. You missed me three times last night from twenty-five feet. You didn't want to walk in on Fleming and start shooting, because you didn't know how many bullets it would take. Plenty of men have lived with four or five slugs in them and you had to be sure. You wanted him quiet so you could do the job with one shot."

He realized he was wiping his palms on his coat, and stopped. "Afterward you went to Estey—or had you already made the date?—and suggested a ride in his car. Down by the waterfront where it was dark and quiet. A shot at close range was easy then, and when you'd taken that gun and left yours behind for the police you had a perfect solution for Fleming's murder that would never involve you."

He turned back and found Tremaine had not moved. He rose slowly and went over to the sofa, not looking at the gun. He moved a pillow so he could sit on the arm and then touched Tremaine on the shoulder. "Did you hear that?"

"I heard it." Tremaine blinked and seemed to shake himself.

"The police are going to

want some explanation. You knew Fleming had been murdered. You knew Sylvia was being questioned, that she was involved with the most likely suspect." Standish paused, and a sudden impatience struck at him. "You discover the girl you love knows the man who ran down your brother. Weren't you suspicious? What did you think it was—coincidence?"

"She told me about that." Tremaine leaned forward, clasped hands between his knees. "I went away for a while after my brother's death. When I came back Sylvia said Fleming had been bothering her. He wanted to take her out, give her presents. He was jealous if she spoke to another man. She was afraid of him and what he might do, and she wouldn't let me go to the police because she said I mustn't be involved.

"That's why she started coming here in a wig and dark glasses. She said it would only be until October and then we could get married quietly and go somewhere else to live."

He sighed and said, "I tried to argue with her, but she told me about this young fellow who thought he was in love with her. She said she wasn't encouraging him, but that she was afraid there might be trouble between him and Fleming. She said it was her

problem and that she'd handle it some way without involving me. She said our love had to be a secret until we were married."

His voice trailed off and he inspected his clasped hands. The room was suddenly quiet, and as Standish tried to understand what Tremaine had said, the explanation came to him, slowly at first and then with a mounting conviction. The answer, it seemed, lay in the character of Tremaine, in the girl's physical appeal.

Standish did not stop to analyze that appeal now; but he recalled how he, as a man, had responded to it. He knew that Fleming, who by background and experience should know much about such women, had succumbed to her allure. So had Estey, believing her lies and trusting her implicitly. How then could Tremaine, with his quiet, unassertive ways and lack of experience, hope to deny her, once she, with her cleverness, had made up her mind to trap him?

So Tremaine had believed her, too, and was no doubt grateful for his seeming good fortune. With Sylvia in his arms it would be easy for him to let her make decisions, to promise her everything she desired, to wait however long she asked in the hope that one day she would be his.

There had always been women like this, and men who danced attendance; but even as Standish understood how it must have been with Tremaine, he found the thought sickening and distasteful.

"All right," he said. "I guess that's it. Maybe the police—"

The girl cut him off. "Listen, Donald," she said in a voice that made Standish glance around. "He can't prove any of it. Once we get rid of this gun he hasn't a thing."

She hesitated, no longer the hard-eyed girl who had clawed at Standish and defied him in harsh, vindictive phrases; this was the girl he had known before, smiling—all but the eyes—confident that she could recapture her perfidious influence.

"You can help, Donald," she said with quiet persuasiveness. "We'll get out of here right now. We'll take the doctor with us. We can decide about him later, but we must be sure no one ever finds the gun. Please. You must believe me, Donald. There isn't any other proof."

Tremaine came slowly to his feet and Standish misunderstood his reaction. "Don't be a fool!" he said.

Tremaine did not seem to hear. He had eyes only for the girl, and when he had straightened, his chin came up and he

seemed to stretch still taller, his face gray and traces of shock beginning to show through.

"I'll take that gun!" he said in a voice Standish had never heard. "We're not going anywhere."

"Donald!"

The word was sharply reproachful, and when he took a forward step she came quickly out of her chair.

"Give it to me, Sylvia."

"No!" She stiffened, and the gun, which had been pointed at Standish, shifted to Tremaine. She watched him take another slow step, and now her eyes took on a dangerous glint. "No, you fool!"

And suddenly the tension that had been working on Standish wound tightly inside him and he caught his breath. The girl would never surrender the gun.

She said as much in the next instant. She tried to back up, and the chair got in her way. She seemed to brace herself. Half screaming at Tremaine now, threatening him because she seemed aware, as Standish was, that Tremaine had no intention of stopping.

"I'll kill you both," she screamed. "No one will know. The only one who could hurt me is Fleming, and he's dead."

"You murdered my brother," Tremaine said in a

voice that was horrible to hear. "You murdered Fleming and Estey. You tried to kill Standish."

He hesitated, seemed to get his balance for the next step. Standish knew he was going to take it, just as he knew the reason was not courage, as such, but shock. Until now Tremaine had thought this girl could do no wrong. Now his world was shattered. He had paid for the murder of his own brother. It was as if his only salvation, his only hope of self-respect, lay in cleansing himself of all complicity.

Tremaine took the step, and Standish saw the finger tighten on the gun, recognized the brutal resolution which filmed the girl's mad gaze. He cried out a warning that no one heard, and then, because there was nothing else he could do, he reached surreptitiously for the pillow beside him.

He threw it as he came to his feet, sailing it at the gun, watching it spin with what seemed like agonizing slowness past Tremaine's shoulder.

It was not much of a weapon, that pillow, but it served a purpose. It distracted the girl just long enough. She saw it coming and did not know whether to duck or to shoot, and then Standish was moving, hearing the shot a split instant

before the pillow hit the gun.

Tremaine stopped where he was. The automatic fell and skidded across the floor, and now the panic struck at the girl and she wheeled and ran, forgetting the gun in her haste to get out. Somehow she had the door open before Standish got close, and then she was gone.

Standish made no attempt to follow her. He went over to the gun, picked it up gingerly. He looked at Tremaine, and now the other was staring curiously at the thin bluish mark on the heel of one hand where the bullet had grazed him. It was only a nick and there was just a trace of blood.

"She—would have killed me," he said in a shaky voice, "if it hadn't been for you."

Although he was emotionally shaken and none too steady, Standish sought to reassure Tremaine, but before he could speak he heard the commotion in the hall. When he stepped through the open door he saw Lieutenant Ballard half carrying, half dragging the struggling girl up the stairs. Close behind came Mary Hayward.

Sylvia was still struggling when Ballard got her inside the room and motioned Standish to close the door. She mouthed frenzied words that had no

meaning, her dress was up above her knees, and the front was torn. In desperation Ballard shook her, stood her on her feet, and shook her again. Then, suddenly, she was in a limp heap on the floor, and Ballard was lifting her and carrying her to the sofa.

Ballard's neck was red and his face was grim and sweaty. He blew out his breath and said, "Okay, start being a doctor."

Standish nodded to Mary, who stood silently by the door. She understood that he wanted the bag in his car and left the room at once. Standish looked again at Tremaine. The shock still showed in the ashen face, the hollow, sightless eyes. Tremaine had aged five years in the last hour, and as a medical man Standish was more worried about him than he was about the girl . . .

It was after midnight before matters were in hand and statements taken. Finally there were only Standish and Mary left in Ballard's office as the lieutenant went over and closed the door. He found a half-filled bottle of whiskey in a lower drawer and brought out paper cups.

"This," he said happily, "is strictly against regulations." He poured a spot of whiskey in each cup, added water from the cooler. "No ice," he said, and

then sat down, saluted with his cup, and drank gratefully. "Well," he said, "you were right again, Doc."

"So were you."

"Hunh?"

"About the chloral hydrate." Standish smiled. "That first morning you said if anyone had fed it to Fleming it was the girl. And she did."

"Yeah. That's right, I did." Ballard chuckled at the memory, and then said, "When did you really tumble it was her?"

"Not till this afternoon," Standish said. "I thought Donald Tremaine might have been behind it, since he stood to gain the most. A couple of long black hairs ruined that premise."

He explained how he had found them and what the city chemist had done. "He found out they were dyed," he said.

"So?"

"Dyed all the way. From tip to tip." Standish sampled his drink and it tasted good. "If they had come from someone's head the color would have been different at the root. They suggested a wig."

Ballard nodded. "Yeah," he said. "And a brunette like Mrs. Tremaine would hardly be wearing a brunette wig."

"The toilet articles clinched it. Eddie found a couple of prints. You fingerprinted Sylvia

Keith that first night in hopes you'd get a 'make' with what you found in Fleming's apartment. You didn't then, but Eddie did today."

Standish gestured with his cup. "Sylvia was Donald's secret love. She came to him every Monday night—the night the club was closed, though I never thought of that—and she was involved in Fleming's murder, and Fleming had killed Donald's brother. It was just too much to be coincidental."

He said, "It seemed to me that Donald was the weak one. I thought if I confronted him with what I had I'd get the true story of that five thousand dollars he handed out. I never figured on her having the gun."

Mary sighed heavily. "She must have been insane."

"Not legally," Standish said. "A thorough psychiatric examination will tell, but as a guess I'd say her trouble was environmental rather than psychotic."

Ballard put his cup down. "She would have gotten away with it if you hadn't found that little powder paper she discarded and then tested for chloral hydrate in the P.M." He grinned, his eyes respectful.

"You're like Old Doc Lathrop," he said. "You got curious and you didn't care what anybody said, or if it was your

business or not; you couldn't let go until you had the truth. I guess that was it, hunh?"

"Maybe something like that," Paul said, but even as he spoke he remembered Sylvia's strange appeal, and it came to him that, given a different set of circumstances, he might have been no more able to resist it than Donald Tremaine.

It was not a flattering thought, or an easy one to dismiss. He saw that Mary stood beside him and as he said good night to Ballard he took her arm. It felt firm and warm under his hand, and as she smiled up at him he knew that here, at least, was something real, something honest, something good.



# Hugh Pentecost

## The Masked Crusader

For those of you who may not have read Hugh Pentecost's stories about Pierre Chambrun, let us give you a brief dossier on the resident manager of the Beaumont, New York City's top luxury hotel, and on the Beaumont itself. Pierre Chambrun is what might be called an "original"—a short dark man with very black eyes buried in deep pouches—eyes that can twinkle with humor or turn as cold as those of a hanging judge. He has a positive genius for dealing with people—from a dishwasher to a Duchess. He seems to have a special built-in radar that lets him know exactly where trouble is at the precise moment that it happens—any kind of trouble from a trivial complaint to murder.

The Hotel Beaumont is not so much a hotel to Pierre Chambrun as a "way of life." In fact, it is like a small city, self-contained, self-sufficient, with its own shops and restaurants, its own police force—and Pierre Chambrun in personal charge, with his Swiss-watch precision, Continental efficiency, and American know-how...

This short novel, one of seven complete in this volume, asks the provocative question: can a TV character called *The Masked Crusader*, created wholly out of a writer's imagination, come to life and commit murder?...

### Detective: PIERRE CHAMBRUN

It began for me on a brisk fall morning. At that time nobody was dead, except on paper. I was looking over the list of newly registered guests from the night before—part of my job as public relations director at the Hotel Beaumont —when my secretary buzzed me from the outer office.

"An old college friend of yours is out here to see you,"

she said, "Norman Geller."

"Never heard of him," I said.

"I'll send him in," Sheldon said sweetly. I knew she was talking in front of this unwanted visitor. Intuition told me I was about to be clipped for the Alumni Fund by some eager beaver.

"Thank you, Miss Mason," I said, giving it a sardonic reading.

My old college chum walked into the office. I didn't know him, and yet there was something vaguely familiar about him. He was, at that moment, a sort of rumpled Westchester country-club type—tweed jacket, turtle-necked navy-blue sports shirt, gray flannel slacks, custom-made loafers. But he looked a little as if he'd slept in the entire outfit.

"Mark!" he said, holding out his hand, "what luck to find you here." His handshake was firm but not meant to impress. He saw that I was puzzled. "You don't have the faintest idea who I am, do you?"

"Something stirs, but bells don't ring," I said.

"Norbert Gellernacht," he said. "Little Norbert Gellernacht."

An image came sharply into focus. Norbert Gellernacht had been an eager sophomore in my senior year. He'd worn thick

glasses in those days and he was trying desperately to gain a measure of popularity by writing an allegedly witty column for the college daily. I had thought of him as a pleasant nothing who was never going to make it because he tried too hard. My philosophy professor might have called that a *non sequitur*.

"Norbert!" I said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"I saw your name on the hotel card in my room," he said. "Public Relations Director. Boy, was I glad, because I need a friend in city hall."

"Sit down," I said. It obviously wasn't going to be a pitch for the Alumni Fund.

He sat down in the armchair by my desk and lit a cigarette. His hands weren't too steady. "I changed my name after I sold my first piece of magazine fiction," he said. "Nobody would ever remember 'Norbert Gellernacht'."

"So you've become a professional writer," I said. "You always wanted to, didn't you?" I thought he must be doing pretty well if he could afford the Hotel Beaumont's prices.

"I used to think so," he said, "until about three weeks ago. I now know that I am just a highpriced salami slicer."

"Oh?"

"Television," he explained.

"That's where the money is, no?"

"This road, paved with gold, leads straight to the alcohol tank or the loony bin," he said, grinning at me. "That's why I need your help, Mark."

"Oh," I said. I was full of "ohs" that morning.

"I am writing a pilot script for a new TV series to be called *The Masked Crusader*," he said. "It will star the great Robert Saville, who is, as I daresay you know, a guest in this mink-lined hostelry of yours."

That was one thing I did know—that Robert Saville was a guest at the Beaumont—a suite on the 19th floor with half a dozen surrounding rooms for secretaries, valets, and other minions, including a doll who looked as though she did nothing at all efficient with her clothes on. Robert Saville is the current answer to filling the gap left when Clark Gable shuffled off this mortal coil. The difference between Gable and Saville is, I suspect, that Gable was a very decent guy and Saville is a prize phony. He had already produced one headache for me. His secretary, a sensible-looking girl named Sally Bevans, had come to my office the day Saville checked in.

"It is to be clearly understood, Mr. Haskell," she said to

me, "that Mr. Saville's presence at the Beaumont is to be a deep dark secret. He's here to work with the producers, director, and writer on a film script. Let the word out that he's here and he'll be swamped."

"By the common people?" I said.

Her smile was amiable. A wise young owl, I thought. "We are only talking to vice-presidents this week," she said.

The next day it was in all the newspapers—plus a couple of TV interviews. Robert Saville was in town, staying at the Beaumont. Our lobby suddenly looked like Grand Central Station at commuter time. I had to assume that Saville's Hollywood-studio promotion man had blown the story.

I ran into the unruffled and chic-looking Sally Bevans in the center of a swarm of screaming female teen-agers in the lobby that afternoon.

"Don't blame me!" I shouted at her over the din.

"Title of a popular song," she said.

"Who did blow it?"

"The Master," she said.

"Saville himself?"

"He couldn't stand the loneliness," she said. "He's surrounded by a mere two dozen vice-presidents and he couldn't stand the loneliness . . ."

Norman Geller was grinning at me. "Interesting thing about Saville," he said. "Whenever you mention him people always go into a kind of trance. If you were a girl I'd know what you were remembering."

"So I'm not a girl, Norman," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"As I told you, I'm writing *The Masked Crusader*," Norman said. "It was my idea. I got paid money for it. I got paid money for what is called a treatment. I was then hired to write the shooting script, which means more money, and royalties on the original run and all the reruns. Until about ten days ago I had dollar signs in place of eye pupils. Then things got rough. I am on the nineteenth rewrite now. You know why?"

"Why, Norman?"

"Because about fifty people have to get into the act. There's Saville who has his own personal image about *The Masked Crusader*. There's the director who thinks there should be a 'message.' There's the Network vice-president for Programming, and the Network vice-president for Development. There's Rachel Stanton, the leading lady, who has *her* image, and there is Walter Cameron, another writer waiting in the wings. And there is T. James Carson."

I knew that Thomas James Carson was the big wheel at the Network. Just the other day the papers had reported he'd exercised a stock option that had netted him a million and a half.

"I get three-quarters of the way through the script," Norman said, "and there is suddenly mass hysteria. Hector Cross, V.P. for Programming, thinks the last scene should come first. Paul Drott, V.P. for Development, says the tease should be incorporated in the body of the script and I should think up a new tease. Karl Richter, the director, just looks at me, fish-eyed, and says, 'Where's the message, Norman? I mean you aren't *saying* anything, Cookie.'

"Then Saville takes the version over to T. James Carson and insists on reading it aloud to him. Saville is worth so much money to the Network and the movie studio that Carson has to listen. But he hates Saville for making him listen and so he hates the script. 'Interesting, but it needs work—a lot of work.' 'Yes, sir, T.J. What kind of work?' T.J. will make notes when he has a free moment. Of course he doesn't have a free moment. And we're supposed to start shooting next Monday.

"Well, here's my situation, Mark. It's never going to be

finished, see? They won't let me finish it. If I don't finish it I lose a major portion of my rights in it. But I can't finish it. They hang around me like vultures. They snatch each page as it comes out of the typewriter. They come back with suggestions. 'This version is going to be it?' I ask them. 'Yes, Norman,' they say, 'this is it. You're a great guy, Norman, a wonderful guy, Norman, a genius, Norman. This will be *it*.' But they won't let me finish it."

"Sounds wild."

"I've got to finish it—and then they can go fly!" Norman said.

"So finish it."

"I need a hideout," Norman said. "That's why I came to you. I need a room here in the hotel that nobody knows about. I mustn't be registered. No phone calls. I want to stay hidden from five thousand vice-presidents and their five thousand private detectives."

"I think something could be arranged," I said.

"Bless you!" Norman said. "I need two uninterrupted days to finish the script—just two days."

I have an apartment down the hall from my office—living room, bedroom, kitchenette. I spend some time there and some time at a nice little garden

apartment three blocks from the hotel occupied by my secretary, Shelda Mason. Shelda and I are "like that." Norman could have my apartment for two days without registering. I explained the setup to him and he was delighted.

"Can I go there now?" he asked. "You could send someone to my room for my typewriter, the script, my razor, my slippers, and a clean shirt."

"It's a deal. You really don't want anyone to be able to reach you?"

"No one! I've been out on the town all night. There are four million messages for me in my mailbox. If there's anything really important I'll call back. But no one is to reach me."

"Right. They'll call your room. There'll be no answer. You don't answer the phone in my room because it will be for me."

"Mark, you're a doll!"

I took Norman down the hall to my apartment. I fixed him up with a card table he could put his typewriter on. There was stuff in the kitchenette so that he could make coffee and eggs and a variety of sandwiches, so he wouldn't have to call room service. He was almost psychotic about being seen by anyone—word would get back to Saville and the vice-presidents . . .

I was getting some papers together for my morning session with the big boss when my telephone rang. I heard the calm voice of Sally Bevans, Robert Saville's secretary.

"I have to ask you a favor, Mr. Haskell," she said.

"Any time, any place, lady," I said.

"I know that joke," she said.

"I apologize. Just a figure of speech meant to imply a secret passion for you, Miss Bevans."

"This is serious," she said. "We've lost a writer."

"Well, well."

"His name is Norman Geller, registered in Room 1927. He's not there."

"How do you know?"

"Doesn't answer his phone. Hasn't picked up dozens of messages left at the desk for him. He's supposed to be working—matter of life and death, you might say. We have to have a shooting script by Monday. Mr. Saville became alarmed last night and got the housekeeper to open Room 1927 with a passkey. He wasn't there. The page in the typewriter is the same page he was writing late yesterday."

I'd forgotten to ask Norman how he'd spent his time "on the town."

"So he went out," I said.

"Going out is against the rules," Sally Bevans said, a

slightly wry note in her voice. "I'm instructed to ask you to have the hotel security officer search the premises. Mr. Saville thinks Mr. Geller may have had a nervous breakdown. He fears suicide."

"And you?"

"I think he just couldn't take it any more," Sally said. "The point is if he doesn't finish the script he's out more thousands of dollars than I can estimate. He may be dead drunk somewhere in the hotel."

"I'll turn the mice loose," I said. "If they come up with anything I'll have Jerry Dodd call you. He's our security officer."

"Thank you, Mr. Haskell."

"Thank you, Miss Bevans. Would a very dry vodka martini in the Trapeze Bar about one o'clock interest you at all? Over a progress report?"

"It would interest me," she said, "but I'm afraid I'm chained to the chariot wheels."

I called Jerry Dodd and explained things. Norman was to be left unmolested. If Jerry was called by a vice-president or Miss Bevans or the great Saville or even T. James Carson he was to say he was still looking.

I then called Johnny Thacker, the day bell captain, explained the setup to him, and gave him a list of things Norman wanted from his room,

with instructions to get them to my apartment as unobtrusively as possible.

The Masked Crusader could now, I felt certain, crusade for the next two days in peace.

Pierre Chambrun, resident manager of the Beaumont and my boss, is a real "original." As his name suggests, he is French by birth. He came to this country as a very young man, went into the hotel business, and reached the pinnacle as manager of New York's top luxury hotel. The Beaumont, he often says, is not a hotel but a way of life. It is, in fact, like a small town, self-contained, self-sufficient, with its own shops and restaurants, its own police force, and its own "mayor."

Chambrun, short, dark, very black eyes buried in deep pouches—eyes that can twinkle with humor or turn as cold as a hanging judge's when he's displeased—has a genius for dealing with people, from the lowliest dishwasher to visiting royalty. His staff gives him an almost fanatical loyalty. He has the sense to delegate authority and the genius to be on hand in a crisis to shoulder the major responsibility. They say he has a special radar that tells him exactly where trouble is at the precise moment it happens. "When I don't know what's

going on in my hotel," he said, "it will be time for me to retire."

He didn't know about Norman Geller when I went into his office, but I told him. Anything out of the ordinary gets told, or else.

He was sitting at his carved Florentine desk in his very plush office, the walls decorated by two Picassos and a Chagall—not reproductions, you understand. He was sipping his inevitable demitasse cup of Turkish coffee. The coffee maker was on a sideboard and kept in constant operation by Miss Ruysdale, his indispensable secretary.

He listened with obvious amusement to my account of Norman's problems.

"Millions of dollars on the line for a piece of comic-strip literature. *The Masked Crusader!*" He snorted, and then his eyes narrowed. "Saville is creating a problem, Mark. The lobby is a madhouse."

"You could ask him to leave," I said.

He frowned. "The Network, the Hollywood crowd—important customers," he said. "If Saville wasn't such a vain ass—"

"The funny thing is he comes and goes at will without those silly girls even knowing it," Miss Ruysdale said. "He

puts on a gray hairpiece, black glasses, black hat pulled down over his face, and has someone push him right through the crowd in a wheel chair. Who notices an old cripple? I watched him go out this morning and no one paid the slightest attention. Down the block off comes the hat, the wig, and the glasses, and the magnificent Robert Saville parades down the avenue. He's made arrangements at the corner drug store for them to keep the chair for him. When he's ready he comes back—in disguise."

"Loving every minute of it," Chambrun muttered. "I take it from your story, Mark, that we're going to have to put up with it until Monday?"

"That's when Norman's supposed to be finished," I said.

The buzzer on Chambrun's desk sounded. Johnny Thacker, the day bell captain, was in the outer office. He was summoned into the Presence. He looked a little odd to me, as though he might have eaten something that didn't agree with him.

"You get my friend taken care of?" I asked.

"Yeah, I got the stuff to him," Johnny said. He moistened his lips. "There's something your friend didn't tell you, Mr. Haskell."

"Oh?"

"He didn't tell you there was a dead man in his closet."

Norman's room was a mess: ashtrays overflowing, crumpled pieces of paper tossed around the floor, soiled shirts and underthings lying on the un-made bed. Evidently Norman had told the housekeeper he didn't want the maid in his room.

Jerry Dodd, the Beaumont's security officer, was already in Room 1927 when Chambrun and I, with Johnny Thacker trailing, arrived. Johnny had done the proper thing, calling Jerry Dodd before he did anything else. Jerry is a slim wiry man in his late forties, with dark eyes that are never still. He is another of the indispensables on Chambrun's highly efficient staff. The Beaumont has its problems like any other hotel—deadbeats, drunks, expensive call girls who appear from time to time in the Trapeze Bar, professional hotel thieves who seldom get caught and amateurs who always get caught, suicides, heart attacks suffered by elderly gentlemen in the rooms of young ladies who are not their wives. There are births and normal deaths. And on at least a half dozen occasions in my time as P.R. director there have been violent deaths. Murder.

Jerry was standing by the open closet door when we came in. He looked around, his eyes bright and cold.

"Better not touch anything," he said. "I've called Homicide."

"That bad?" said Chambrun.

"That bad," Jerry said. "Broken neck. Looks like he might have been karate-chopped." He stepped away from the door so that we could see into the closet. A man was crumpled there, his body twisted into an unnatural position. There was almost a surprised look on the dead face.

"I know him," I heard myself say. "He lunches here three, four times a week. He's asked a favor or two of me on publicity releases. Talent agent name of Frank Hansbury. Handles actors, writers, directors—show-business people."

"Handle your friend Geller?" Jerry asked.

"No idea. Hansbury's being here suggests—"

"It sure does," Jerry said. He turned to Chambrun. "I have a man stationed outside Mark's apartment, just in case Mr. Geller decides to take off."

"I think we better talk to your friend, Mark," Chambrun said.

"I'll join you when I get a man here to cover this room," Jerry said.

Chambrun and I went down to the fourth floor. Jerry's man was outside my door.

"All quiet," the man said. "He's in there typing away like mad."

I used my key to let us in. Norman, coatless, a cigarette dangling from a corner of his mouth, was at the typewriter set up on the card table I'd provided. He looked up, frowning. When he saw Chambrun he groaned.

"Now what?" he said.

"Is Frank Hansbury your agent?" I asked him.

"He is, and a damn good one," Norman said. He glanced at Chambrun. "You're the manager, aren't you? You're not going to tell me there's some reason I can't work in Mark's apartment?"

"Are you on the outs with Hansbury?" Chambrun asked.

"He is my rod and my staff, my comforter," Norman said. "I love Frank. But will you please get this over with, whatever it is, so I can get back to—"

"Hansbury is in your room," Chambrun said.

"Who let him in?" Norman said.

"And he's dead," Chambrun said.

That really got to Norman. He stared at us as though he hadn't heard right. "You have

to be kidding," he whispered.

"We think he's been murdered, Norman," I said.

"God Almighty, *how?*" Norman said.

"Our man thinks a karate-chop to the back of the head," I said. "Broke his neck."

The ash fell from Norman's cigarette. He didn't notice it dribble down the front of his navy-blue sports shirt. "Geoffrey Cleghorn is a karate expert. Black belt," Norman said.

"Who is Geoffrey Cleghorn?" Chambrun asked, his voice sharp.

Norman started to laugh. There was a hysterical note to it. He waved at the page in his typewriter. "The Masked Crusader," he said.

There were little beads of sweat on Norman's forehead. "What a terrible thing," he said. "I talked to Frank only last night. He—"

"Where were you last night, Mr. Geller?" Chambrun said. "According to Mark you were 'out on the town'."

"It doesn't matter where I was," Norman said. "I went to see a friend—about six o'clock last night. I haven't been in my room since. When I came back this morning I went straight to Mark's office."

"Who is the friend you went to see?" Chambrun asked.

"That's immaterial," Norman said.

"You're going to need an alibi, Mr. Geller."

"Now wait a minute—"

"You do research on the karate skills of your character, The Masked Crusader?"

"Well, sure. I had to know what I could expect him to be able to do. I took a few simple lessons—just to learn the basic techniques. But—"

"You are certainly going to need an alibi," Chambrun said.

Norman sat very still for a moment. Then he lit a fresh cigarette with hands that shook. "Is this official or am I talking to friends?" he asked.

I glanced at Chambrun.

"The police will be here shortly," Chambrun said. "That will be official. What would Hansbury be doing in your room, Mr. Geller? Did he have a key?"

"Not unless he got it from you," Norman said. He had made the decision to talk. "Frank was a very good friend as well as my agent. He knows all about the hell I've been going through with this pilot. Most of it's money hell. I'm supposed to get paid for each rewrite. I told Mark there have been nineteen. But none of them was actually finished—so the Network is claiming this is still the first draft. Frank has

been fighting them tooth and nail. He's got the Writers' Guild on his side. We've been trying to bypass all the vice-presidents and Saville and get to Carson himself. He's the big wheel at the Network."

"So Hansbury came to your room to tell you he'd failed and you blew your stack and chopped him," Chambrun said.

"Oh, cut it out, will you?" Norman said. "I'm the fiction writer around here, Mr. Chambrun."

"So what did happen?"

"I talked to Frank just before I went out last night—around six. He was still in his office. He told me Saville was trying to keep us away from Carson. Saville owns a piece of this package and was afraid if we got to Carson the Network might junk the whole project. Frank said he was still trying to set up an appointment with Carson for today. I told him I was going out—for the night. I needed a breather. I told him where he could reach me if it was absolutely necessary."

"Where?"

Norman leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Chambrun, I spent the night with a girl friend and I'm not going to bring her into it."

"You may have to."

"Like hell I will!" Norman said.

"Hansbury knew you were going to be with this girl?"

"Yes, and if it's necessary he can vouch—" Norman stopped, his mouth hanging open. Frank Hansbury wasn't going to vouch for anything.

"You're on your own, Mr. Geller," Chambrun said quietly.

Norman looked at me. "If I killed Frank in my room why would I send you to get my things, Mark? You'd be bound to find the body. If I killed him—and I didn't—I'd make sure you didn't find the body for a couple of days."

"Why a couple of days?" Chambrun asked.

"So I could finish this damned script and get paid for it!" Norman said.

Chambrun sighed. "Let's be realistic, Norman," he said. "You didn't see or hear from Hansbury after you talked to him about six last night?"

"No."

"He didn't call you at your girl's apartment?"

"Not while I was there."

"Which is where?"

"No!" Norman said.

"In this TV project might Hansbury have come to the hotel to see someone else?"

"Sure, they're all here like vultures," Norman said. "Saville, a hatful of vice-presidents like Hector Cross and Paul Drott, Karl Richter the

director . . . Frank could have come to see any of them about the appointment with Carson or about money. He wouldn't have come to my room, though, because he knew I was out."

"Could he have gone to your room to get the script? To make some point about it?"

"He'd know better. He'd know I'd clobber anyone who touched my script."

"Or karate-chop anyone, Norman?"

"Will you cut that out!" Norman said.

Lieutenant Hardy looks more like a puzzled Notre Dame fullback than a Homicide detective. He's tall, square-jawed, a very tenacious and efficient police officer. We were lucky to have him on the case. He'd been in on a couple of other murders at the Beaumont and he knew us—Chambrun in particular.

"What's your theory about your friend?" Hardy asked me.

We were in Chambrun's office. Hardy had been on the scene for about an hour, going over Norman's room with his technicians and their little vacuum cleaners, powders, brushes, cameras.

"I think not," I said.

"You, Chambrun?"

"If Geller killed Hansbury," Chambrun said, "he certainly

didn't mean us *not* to pin it on him. You could say he actually sent us to his room to find the body. I notice that bedroom slippers were on the list of things he wanted. That would take us right into the closet."

Hardy scowled at the notebook he was holding open in his big hand. "Preliminary report would indicate that Hansbury has been dead at least fifteen hours. Could be more, but not much less—an educated guess-timate by the Medical Examiner's man." Hardy looked at his wrist watch. "It's now five minutes to noon. That means Hansbury was probably killed around eight, nine o'clock last night. If he came here to see some of the rest of these people it's time we found out." He put away his notebook. "My wife is going to drive me crazy," he said.

"How so?"

"Robert Saville and Cary Grant are my chief rivals," he said drily.

It was the attractive Miss Bevans who answered our ring at the door of Robert Saville's suite. Her thinly penciled eyebrows rose in an expression of surprise when she saw us.

"You have news of Mr. Geller?" she asked me.

I introduced Chambrun and Hardy.

"Police!" she said. "Then

something *has* happened to Norman?"

"I think we'd better come inside," Hardy said.

"I'm sorry but Mr. Saville is in conference. If it's a matter of raising bail or something—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Bevans," Chambrun said. "A man named Frank Hansbury has been murdered. The Lieutenant will have to talk to Mr. Saville, conference or no conference."

"Hansbury!" she said. It was a whisper. "How perfectly awful!"

We went into the suite's small foyer. In the room beyond we could hear excited voices, chief among them Robert Saville's pear-shaped tones projecting to the back row of the second balcony.

"I will *not* have a double for my tricks," Saville was blasting. "I will *not* be subjected to jokes about my not doing my own stunts. Therefore the stunts are going to have to be things I *can* do, Karl, and that's that!"

"You'd better let Norman in on the secret," a drawling voice said. "He's got a climbing sequence on the side of a building in the second scene that you just *can't* do, Bob. It's been agreed to from the very beginning. Maybe we'd better change the whole concept and call it 'Little Lord Fauntleroy Rides Again'."

"You cheap son-of-a—" Saville shouted.

"Sticks and stones, Bobby," the other voice interrupted.

"Hansbury was here last night," Miss Bevans said at my elbow. "I simply can't believe it."

She opened the door and we walked onstage.

Whatever kind of a jerk he may be in private life, Robert Saville, in the flesh, was impressive. He was tall, dark, with good character lines in his handsome face. His mouth had a weak, slightly pouting look to it, but all in all he exuded masculinity. In all honesty I think the Little Lord Fauntleroy crack was unwarranted. I knew he was an expert horseman, brilliant with fencing foils, and I'd heard he was beating the brains out of the squash pro each day in the courts on the roof of the hotel. He was tanned a beautiful bronze. Caught off guard, as he was when we walked into the room, he still managed an attitude of graceful elegance.

"Would you be good enough to explain this invasion, Sally," he said, looking at Chambrun, Hardy, and me as though we were three cigar-store Indians.

Sally introduced us. "Something dreadful has happened, Mr. Saville," she said. "Frank Hansbury has been murdered."

"I always knew that jerk would do us in some way or other," Saville said.

I saw Chambrun's face go stony. He isn't fond of flippancy—unless he's responsible for it himself.

"You'll have to forgive Bobby for exposing his warm human emotions so openly," the blond man by the windows said. He was, I took it, Karl of the Fauntleroy crack—Karl Richter, the director of Norman's opus. He had a Germanic crewcut, and his thin lips were twisted in a sardonic smile. Not a very nice guy, I thought. He gestured toward his almost total opposite—a young man with black hair, worn rather long, who sat deep in an upholstered armchair, his face a blank. "The robot in the armchair is Paul Drott, gentlemen, a vice-president."

Hardy took charge. "Hansbury was found dead, his neck broken, in a closet in Norman Geller's room," he said. "Do the stunts you can do, Mr. Saville, include karate?"

Saville ignored the question. "Sally, call Walter Cameron and tell him he's going to have to finish the script. Get Hector Cross here. He'll have to know. And tell him to keep it from Carson as long as he can. We don't want Carson flying off the handle till we know where

we're at. And send George in here."

"Right away, Mr. Saville." Sally started for the next room.

"Just a moment," Hardy said. "I'm giving the orders here. I heard you say, Miss Bevans, that Hansbury was here last night."

"Of course he was here," Saville said. "He's Norman's agent. He's been in our hair ever since this project got under way. He was here last night before dinner, bellyaching about something or other." He made a sweeping gesture that took in the others. "I told you Norman was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I told you we shouldn't keep all our eggs in one basket. Wally Cameron should have been working on this script long ago." He turned to Hardy. "Why did Norman kill him?"

"We don't know that Geller did kill him," Hardy said.

"Where is he? Have you found him?" Saville asked. "The little twerk has been missing since early last night. We have a mountain of notes for him and he's not around. He deserted—powdered—ran out!"

"I understand you got yourself into his room last night," Hardy said.

"With a housekeeper—and Sally," Saville said. "We thought he might be sick when

he didn't answer his phone."

"What time was that?"

Saville looked at Sally.

"About a quarter to ten," she said.

"Did you look in the closet?" Hardy asked.

"Why should we look in the closet?" Saville said. "You don't expect to find a writer in a closet, do you?"

"I ask because at a quarter to ten Hansbury was dead and probably in that closet," Hardy said.

"Oh, God!" Sally said.

"When you find Norman you'll find the answers," Saville said.

"We know where Geller is," Hardy said. "We'll ask him in good time."

"Well, where is he? I've got to talk to him, Lieutenant. The whole beginning of Scene Three is wrong. He's probably working on it right now."

"What makes you think he's working?"

"That's what he's being paid for!" Saville said.

"I think," Chambrun said in a saw-toothed voice, "I've had about enough of this black comedy, Mr. Saville. A man has been murdered in my hotel. The lieutenant and I are here to gather facts."

"Where is George?" Saville shouted, completely ignoring Chambrun.

"On stage, Professor," a new voice said.

The man who came through from the bedroom section of the suite was something you wouldn't believe. He was about two inches over six feet with a body right out of Bernarr McFadden's dream world. Muscles, muscles, muscles. He wore a tight cotton T-shirt that exposed them all. There were also gray slacks and white sneakers. This was a man who could bend iron bars and straighten out horseshoes.

"This is my lawyer, George Brimsek," Saville said. "He'll tell me what I have to do and not do."

Brimsek's hair was a reddish crewcut and he had the coldest gray-green eyes I've ever seen. His smile was pasted on.

Sally made quick introductions and brought him up to date. As Brimsek listened his biceps rippled. I discovered in due course that he really was a lawyer, but his only client was Robert Saville, and his chief duty was to keep Saville in top physical condition. It was his job to lose to Saville in any public competition—golf, tennis, squash, boxing, foils. The truth was he could have taken Saville in any sport with his right arm tied behind him.

"I think you better answer the man's questions, Bob," he

said. "They can make you do it somewhere else less pleasant, you know." He turned to Hardy. "Do I understand you know where Geller is?" It hadn't been mentioned in his presence, so I assumed he'd been listening from the next room.

"We know where he is," Hardy said. "I want to know about Hansbury's visit to this suite last night."

"That's reasonable," Brimsek said. "He showed up here about seven o'clock. We were just going down to the Grill Room for dinner. I was here, Bob, Sally, and—and you, too, weren't you, Paul?"

The vice-president nodded. He seemed to be still in shock.

"There was a lot of shouting," Brimsek said, his smile tightening. "That's been more or less par for the course in our dealings with Hansbury. He has been claiming that Norman was entitled to certain payments for various drafts of the script he's writing. Since there has never been a single completed draft, we claim he's only entitled to payment for that initial draft. Hansbury called us a bunch of crooks and threatened to go to Carson with the whole story. We said he was a chiseling little rat trying to blackmail us. When all that had been said we went to dinner."

"And Hansbury?"

"We left him here. It was the only way to get rid of him since he wouldn't accept our invitation to leave. The last I saw of him he was trying to reach Norman on the phone—I assumed."

"Assumed?"

"He was dialing. He had told us he was going to tell Norman not to write another line. I gather he went to see Norman, they got in an argument, and Hansbury got his neck broken. Norman's very good at karate. I know. I taught him."

"You all went to dinner—you, Miss Bevans, Mr. Saville, and Mr. Drott—leaving Hansbury here?" Hardy looked around and got a collection of affirmative nods.

"Dinner was pretty impossible," Brimsek said. "Bob couldn't swallow a shrimp without having to sign his autograph. We came back up here about eight thirty."

"Hansbury was gone?"

Brimsek nodded. "Gone, leaving a cigarette burn on the telephone table. We began trying to reach Norman then. Bob and Paul had notes for him. He didn't answer. We kept trying. At about a quarter to ten Bob and Sally got the housekeeper to let them into Norman's room. We thought he might be sick or had done

himself some harm. Bob's quite right, he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Norman wasn't there, so that was that. We went out to find some action somewhere."

"Action?"

Brimsek shrugged. "Bob likes to play poker," he said.

"You went out through the mob in the lobby?"

Brimsek grinned. "We have a way."

"The wheel chair," Chambrun said.

"Oh, so you spotted that," Brimsek said.

"There are four keys to this suite," Chambrun said. "None of them is at the front desk. Who has them?"

"That's none of your damn business!" Saville exploded.

"Might as well tell him, Bob," Brimsek said. "He'll find out." He was being uncommonly cooperative, I thought. "Bob has one, of course. I have one. Sally has one."

"And the fourth?"

Brimsek shrugged. "Sheri has one," he said.

"Who is Sheri?" Hardy asked.

"Miss Sheri Southworth," Brimsek said. "She's a lady companion of Bob's who stays here with him."

"When you rent a suite you can have anyone stay with you that you want," Saville said.

"Miss Southworth lives in his suite?" Hardy asked.

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"She's in bed. She's got a bad cold," Saville said.

"Was she here last night?"

"Of course."

"You didn't mention her going to dinner with you."

"I tell you she's got a virus!" Saville said. "She was sick in bed."

"In this suite?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Then she probably knows when Hansbury left. I'd like to talk to her," Hardy said.

"She's sick in bed!" Saville shouted.

"Ask her to join us," Hardy said.

Brimsek nodded to Sally, who left to find Sheri.

"We all have our special tastes in women," Karl Richter said. "Bob is neither a romantic nor an intellectual. He just likes them."

Brimsek looked down at his bulging biceps with an amused grin.

If Miss Sheri Southworth had a cold or virus it was not noticeable. What she did have was a gorgeous shiner. Her left eye was purple and swollen shut. She looked around at us with an amiable grin and said, "I'd really rather switch than fight."

She was something. The blonde hair was out of a bottle; the eyelashes were false; ditto the long tapering fingernails. The only things not false were revealed by her negligee.

"Oooh, look at all the lovely men," she said.

"Shut up, Sheri!" Saville barked.

"There has been a murder, Miss Southworth," Hardy said.

"Ooooh, - how thrilling!" Sheri said. "Anybody I know?"

"Frank Hansbury. Somebody broke his neck," Saville said.

"I understand you were alone with Hansbury in this suite for a while last night, Miss Southworth," Hardy said.

"That Frank Hansbury!" Sheri said. Her gold-tipped fingers touched her swollen eye. "He was only here a little while. On the phone all the time. He was too busy to be interested in me. I came in here for a cigarette and he didn't even look at me." She touched her eye again, then looked at Saville with her good one. "I behaved myself, Bobby."

"Will you shut up, Sheri!" Saville yelled.

"Can you tell us what time Hansbury left here?" Hardy asked.

"Ooooh, I'm afraid not, Lieutenant," she said. "I really have no sense about time at all.

Bobby and the others were downstairs at dinner."

"Do you have any idea who he was talking to on the phone?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I mean, he wasn't really talking to anyone. He kept dialing numbers he didn't get any answers to. One number did answer, I guess, and he said, 'Is Norman there yet?' But I guess Norman wasn't because he hung up. Then I went back to my room, closed the door, and I didn't hear when he left."

Hardy drew a deep breath. "You will all keep yourselves available till I tell you otherwise. Don't leave the hotel till you get the word from me."

"Now look here, copper—" Saville began.

"Cool it, Bob," Brimsek said. "The Lieutenant can hold us all as material witnesses if he chooses. He's being real polite."

"What about me?" Karl Richter said. "I wasn't even in the hotel last night."

"You stay, too," Hardy said.

"Any reason I shouldn't go downstairs for a drink?" Richter asked. "I have a batch of phone calls to make—private."

"You can use my office," Chambrun said.

I was surprised, but I didn't show it. I noticed, as I was leaving, that Paul Drott was

getting up out of his chair. He hadn't spoken a word during our entire visit.

Out in the hall Chambrun turned to Karl Richter. "You wanted to tell us something, Mr. Richter?"

Richter's cold face was a mask. "You're smarter than I thought you were, Mr. Chambrun." We were standing by the elevators. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "Our Bobby's private life is rather unusual," he said. "Can you guess how it is with Sheri? She is—shall we say friendly?—to his friends and for that he beats her up."

"I'm sure that isn't what you really wanted to tell us," Chambrun said coldly.

"I enjoyed telling it to you, anyway," Richter said. "But you're right. I wanted to tell you that people like Bob Saville live in a world you may not understand. This is an ordinary guy from upstate New York—Utica, I think. He came from a middle-class family with no dough. He wanted to be an actor, genuinely. He went to an acting school, worked at anything—dishwashing, waiting on table, night watchman. He got a few odd jobs off-Broadway. A real dedicated guy. Then he hit it big.

"Do you know what he gets for making a movie? Half a

million bucks—plus residuals, plus advertising payoffs, plus a share of profits. This TV series, if it sells, will make him several million dollars. He's so damned rich you couldn't begin to count it. And he's no longer the dedicated young actor from Utica. He's king! If anybody gets in his way, like a writer or a director or a dame or a shoeshine boy—or a talent agent—our Bobby just rolls over him and leaves the remains for the dustman. To him it's unreasonable to imagine that anyone else has any rights. The world is a special-privilege oyster made only for him; none of its rules or laws apply to him. He's not a bad guy, really, but he's lost contact with reality."

"Are you trying to tell us—" Hardy began.

"I'm trying to tell you that if a waiter brought Bob a cold poached egg Bob might easily throw him out of the nineteenth-story window. Then he'd turn to George Brimsek and say, 'I lost my head. I'm sorry. Get me out of it.' Up to now George has always got him out of it. Don't let the muscles fool you. There is more between George's ears than mush."

An elevator door opened and we all stepped in. Chambrun turned to me as the car started

down. "There's very little hope this story won't leak," he said. "You're going to be swamped by news people, Mark. As far as you know Hansbury died of a heart attack in Norman's room. The presence of the police is ordinary routine. If there are any statements to be made Lieutenant Hardy will make them. Have a simple release mimeoed and just hand it out."

I got off at the fourth floor.

If somebody broke my neck and stuffed me in a closet the interested parties would be limited. I have no family. Shelda, my secretary, would cry. Chambren would feel depressed, I think. The police would be concerned, and so would my insurance company.

Hansbury's death touched many more bases, all of them with red-hot publicity angles. There were huge investments on the line. If Robert Saville was in any way involved, his motion picture company stood to lose about \$12,000,000 in as yet unreleased films. The Network had a pennyante investment of \$250,000 in this pilot of Norman's, plus residuals on other shows, plus half a dozen old Saville movies bought for the late late shows at about \$3,000,000 each. This was all real money, plus many other millions they had expected to

make off Saville in the future.

As I sat in my office writing out the phony news release I could imagine what was going on in a dozen offices here and on the West Coast. Robert Saville must be kept clean at all costs. To hell with who murdered Frank Hansbury so long as Saville's public image remained unsullied. I knew the Beaumont would suddenly be swarming with high-priced lawyers, high-priced executives, and, in all probability, high-priced private investigators.

Nobody would give a damn about Hansbury—no one except a family or a girl or maybe a dog waiting in an apartment somewhere for his evening walk.

And then I began to think about Norman—once known as "little Norbert Gellernacht." Norman's position was sticky, to put it mildly. Hardy would be down on him presently with some pretty deadly ammunition. The scene of the crime—Norman's room, undoubtedly loaded with Norman's fingerprints. The relationship with Hansbury—possibly friendly, quite probably explosive at the moment. The murder weapon—the edge of a hand, precision-skilled. Norman had that skill. He had admitted it. George Brimsek had modestly claimed the role of teacher.

I had a vision of little Norbert Gellernacht sitting under a bright light, surrounded by the accusing faces of Hardy and high-powered lawyers and vice-presidents and even presidents. Norbert was ideal guillotine fodder. Norman might well save the huge investments in Robert Saville. Who cares what happens to a writer? Writers are the "nothings" of the entertainment industry, even though the executives keep wistfully chanting that there would be no films, no television, no theater without them. Everybody knows it's actors and directors and executives and vice-presidents who matter.

I went down the hall to my apartment. Believe it or not, I found Norman pounding away at the typewriter when I let myself in with my key. He gave me a slightly irritated smile and went right on pounding.

"Norman," I said, "you're in trouble."

"Be a good boy, Mark, and leave me alone," Norman said. "At this moment Geoffrey Cleghorn, The Masked Crusader, is crossing Fifth Avenue hand over hand on a rope stretched ten stories above the street."

"That's out," I said. "Saville refuses to have any stunts in the script that he can't do himself."

Norman's fingers halted, poised over the keyboard.

"Where did you get that?"

"I just heard him say so."

"That punk! It's been agreed from the start that we'd use a stunt man."

"Norman, have you forgotten that Frank Hansbury has been murdered?"

"I haven't forgotten," he said, quite seriously. "But the only thing I know to do is finish this script. It means money for me, and money for Frank's estate. His commission."

"Does Hansbury have a family?"

"Divorced. No kids," Norman said, looking back at Geoffrey Cleghorn suspended over Fifth Avenue.

I made what I thought was a joke, because it was the worst thing I could think of. "I don't suppose the girl you spent the night with was Hansbury's ex-wife."

Norman looked up at me, frowning. "I don't know how you found out, Mark, but if you tell anyone I'll break your neck."

I felt a cold chill running down my back. "Norman," I said, "don't use that phrase again."

"What phrase?"

"I'll break your neck." There are people who already think you did that to Hansbury."

"Don't be absurd. Frank was my best friend."

"And you were living with his wife?"

"She isn't his wife, Mark. They're divorced."

"And he didn't care?"

"Of course he didn't care. I told you that I told Frank where I was going last night. He even called me there."

"I thought you said you didn't see or hear from him after six o'clock," I said.

"I didn't! He called Gillian before I got there."

That, I thought, would be the phone call that Sheri had heard Hansbury make. "Norman, unless I'm very wrong, you're going to be set up as a fall guy. You'd better forget about *The Masked Crusader* and start thinking about yourself."

"Who's going to set me up?"

"Quite a lot of people who think of Robert Saville as the equivalent of the gold deposit in Fort Knox," I said. "You've just wrapped up the package. You're a karate expert. You knew how to break Frank's neck. You told him you were going to spend the night with his wife and he came up to your room to raise hell about it. You chopped him. Opportunity, motive, weapon."

"You're off your rocker, Mark."

"They all say you were on

the verge of a nervous breakdown."

"Oh, come on, Mark! Do I look as if I were on the verge of a nervous breakdown?"

"No. And that in itself is suspicious, Norman. The way things are you *ought* to look like it." I lit a cigarette and my hands weren't too steady. "If Hansbury didn't come to your room to see you, how did he get in there? Did he have a key?"

"Nobody had a key. I was keeping people out so I could work, not inviting them in. Frank didn't come to my room while I was there."

"Then how did he get in?"

"You've got me, Mark. You've been in the room. Were there any signs of a fight there?"

"Only between you and your typewriter," I said.

"Maybe somebody brought him there and stuffed him in the closet after he was dead," Norman said. He looked at me, his eyes widening. "Maybe somebody is trying to frame me!"

"I think you can classify that suggestion with the Gettysburg Address for sheer literary clarity," I said. "Norman, you're up to your neck in trouble."

I left Norman and went

down to the second floor to see Chambrun. What I wanted to tell him and ask him had to wait because Lieutenant Hardy was there.

We have a private card file at the Beaumont that lists special information about our guests—their financial status, marital situation, any personal habits worth knowing, like whether the guest is an alcoholic or a patron of call girls or an addicted gambler or a troublemaker of a special sort. This information is handled by a simple code—A for alcoholic, D for diplomat, O for over-his-head, meaning the guest can't really afford the Beaumont's prices and mustn't be allowed to get in too deep. WX after a man's name means he's a woman chaser double-crossing his wife. MX after a female guest means she's a man-chaser, double-crossing her husband. N stands for general nuisance, a complainer who has no basis for his complaints.

Hardy was going through a little collection of cards that covered Saville and his entourage. That, I guessed, would include Norman.

Chambrun sat at his desk, his hooded eyes half closed. "You will notice," he said, "that the Network is paying the bills for everyone. Saville's company may be sharing the cost, but that's not our concern."

"These people just turn on the money faucet and watch it go down the drain," Hardy said.

"The world of expense accounts," Chambrun commented wryly.

Hardy looked at me. "How close are you to your friend Geller?" he asked.

"Not close at all. I haven't seen him since college and we were just nodding acquaintances there."

"Then you don't really have any reason to believe in him?"

"Not on a buddy-buddy basis," I said. "But the whole thing so far is just too pat for me to swallow, Lieutenant. I've just been talking to him. I'd swear he was innocent—too damned innocent."

"Meaning?"

"That he's been set up as a prize pigeon. These people would do anything to keep Saville off the hook. You heard Richter. My guess is somebody got in a row with Hansbury—maybe Saville, maybe his muscular lawyer. Both of them play karate games. Maybe Hansbury took a swing at somebody and was chopped down. Not planned, not intentional—but murder. So what to do? If it was me I'd go to the police, admit I had a row with Hansbury, tell them he took a swing at me and that I clobbered him. Self-defense. The worst that

would happen would be a manslaughter charge. I might get away with it.

"But Saville can't risk that. Juries sometimes have a way of being rough on a celebrity. The notoriety could cost a lot of people a lot of money. So Saville and Company take the first out that comes to mind. They know Norman isn't in his room down the hall—they'd been trying to reach him. They drag the dead man down there and stuff him in the closet—and leave Norman to face the music when he gets back."

"So answer me three questions," Hardy said.

"Try me."

"This had to be before eight thirty in the evening."

"Why?"

"That's when Saville and Miss Bevans and Brimsek and Drott came back upstairs from dinner. Are you suggesting all four of them would be covering up a murder?"

"It's not impossible."

"Five of them, to be exact," Hardy said. "The tootsie was in the Saville suite, too."

"I still say it's not impossible."

"Busy time of night in the hotel. People coming and going. Have you figured the risk involved in carrying a dead man even a few yards down the corridor?"

"They had to risk it."

"Nobody pays much attention to a couple of men handling a drunken friend," Chambrun said, his eyes closed.

"Okay," Hardy said drily. "So we have five people in on a conspiracy. The body is moved by acting as though he's a drunk. Now your friend Geller says he spent the night with a girl. He'll produce her if he has to. How do these conspirators know he hasn't got a perfect alibi?"

"They have to risk that, too," I said.

"Boy, they sure do!" Hardy said. "If he doesn't have an alibi what would his motive be? Hansbury, he says, was his best friend."

My mouth felt dry. I knew what the motive could seem to be, and I knew Norman might not be able to produce an alibi without simultaneously producing a motive.

"They've been trying to set it up for you," I said. "Nervous breakdown. Unendurable work pressures. They quarreled over Hansbury's failure to get Norman paid for the work he'd done. Another slight case of manslaughter."

"Why don't they let friend Norman in on it, then?" Hardy asked. "Pay him a nice chunk of dough to take the rap—maybe a year or two in jail."

From what I hear that would be an easier way to make a big hunk of money than writing television pilots."

"And let Norman blackmail them for the rest of their lives?"

Hardy's eyes were cold. "Is your friend the blackmailing type? No, don't answer me, Haskell. You don't know. You'd only be guessing." He stood up and started for the door. "The more I try to involve an army of people in this murder the better I like my chances of pinning it on one single guy—on your friend Geller. His room, he had the know-how, and we'll find the motive. See you around."

Chambrun sat motionless in the big armchair behind his desk. He didn't lift his heavy eyelids when Hardy had gone. But one corner of his mouth moved in a wry smile.

"You are perhaps the worst actor I have ever seen in my life, Mark," he said. "Only a Hardy could have missed the fact that you're bursting with information that will do your friend Norman's case no good at all."

"You mind if I pour myself a drink?" I said. "I missed my usual mid-day martini."

"Help yourself."

I went over to the sideboard and poured myself a stiff

Scotch on the rocks. Chambrun lit one of his Egyptian cigarettes and looked at me through a haze of pale smoke as I swallowed most of my drink at one tilt. I came around to the chair beside his desk and sat down.

"This is how it is," I said.

I told him that Norman had spent the night with Gillian Hansbury, Frank Hansbury's ex-wife. That Hansbury knew he was planning just that. If Mrs. Hansbury came forward to supply Norman with an alibi she would also supply Hardy with a 24-carat motive.

"Maybe not," Chambrun said slowly. "Your friend Norman told us he took off from his room about six o'clock. We know Hansbury was alive at seven, or a little after. He was in Saville's suite making phone calls. If Norman was already at Mrs. Hansbury's—"

"He wasn't. A call came there from Hansbury before Norman arrived."

Chambrun flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Why do you care what happens to Norman?" he asked.

"I'm the chump of all time when it comes to lost causes and underdogs," I said, "and I hate power plays from modern monsters like Saville and Company."

"You're a nice boy, Mark,"

Chambrun said. "Why not go have a chat with Mrs. Hansbury?"

"Norman would never forgive me."

"Would you care—if it cleared him?"

Mrs. Gillian Hansbury was listed in the phone book. She lived on the East Side in the Eighties. I debated calling her to ask if I could talk to her, but then it occurred to me she might get in touch with Norman in some fashion and they'd be ready with a prepared story for me. I wanted to talk to this woman without her being too well balanced.

I don't recall now that I had any particular picture of what Gillian Hansbury might be like as I rode uptown in a taxi. The woods are full of youngish divorcees living on generous alimony who take love where they can find it. It takes a while for a suddenly single girl to develop a whole new social circle. I realized I'd forgotten to ask Norman how long the Hansburys had been separated. If it was fairly recent, Hansbury's reaction to Norman's teaming up with Gillian could be quite unpredictable.

I think I expected an attractive, probably chic, somewhat hardboiled gal to answer my ring at the door bell.

I was accurate about part of it. Gillian Hansbury was rather special to look at: natural red hair, almost violet eyes, a lush figure. She was wearing a very mod shift that stopped about five inches above her knees. A sophisticated, expensive girl-executive type, possibly a former model or an actress. Frank Hansbury had been a talent agent. They could have met professionally.

Before she spoke, after opening her front door tentatively, I saw that she had been crying.

"Yes?" Her voice was pleasantly husky.

"Mrs. Hansbury?"

"Yes."

"My name is Mark Haskell," I said. "I'm a friend of Norman Geller's."

"You're the man at the hotel," she said. She opened the door a little wider. "Come in if you like, Mr. Haskell."

I stepped into a small attractive living room with a wood-burning fireplace. There were many books and a few undistinguished oil paintings that might, I thought, be her own work. On a low table in front of the orange-covered couch was a stale-looking cup of coffee. A silver ashtray was overflowing with butts. The place smelled nice—like a woman.

"Norman sent you?" she asked. "Please sit down."

"He doesn't know I'm here," I said.

Her bright red mouth tightened slightly.

"I want to help Norman," I said. "He's in grave difficulty and he won't help himself."

"Poor Norman," she said. She sat down on the couch and I found it difficult not to look at her lovely legs. "I told him he wouldn't be able to retain his sanity if he kept on writing that television script. I've seen writers go into that Waring Mixer too often."

"His troubles at the moment aren't primarily concerned with the TV script," I said.

She looked rather intently at the ashes in the fireplace. "It's been a rugged day for both of us," she said. "Norman and Frank were very close. And I—" Her voice shook a little. She reached for a cigarette in a lacquered box on the table. I held my lighter for her. Her long lashes were faintly damp. She was fighting tears again.

"Norman's in a kind of a two-way bind," I said. "I take it you could provide him with an alibi for last night. He may need it, Gillian. On the other hand, if you give it to him, you may provide the police with the one thing they need—motive."

She looked back at me, her eyes widening. "Motive for what?"

"At the moment Homicide looks at Norman as their Number One suspect," I said.

"They think *he* killed Frank?"

"They think he may have. They don't know yet about Norman's relationship with you. That would just about sew it up for them."

"How utterly ridiculous!" she said.

"I hope so."

"As far as the alibi is concerned, of course I'll provide it if he needs it," Gillian said. "He got here a little after eight last night and he left here after breakfast this morning."

I reached for a cigarette of my own. I felt little needles along my spine. "I understood Norman left the hotel around six o'clock last night," I said.

"I suppose he may have," Gillian said. "He's staying at the Beaumont because the TV people insist on his being available twenty-four hours a day. But he has an apartment of his own just off Gramercy Park. He went there to pick up mail and get some clean clothes before he came here."

"He told you that?"

"Of course. He phoned me that he'd had it up to his ears and was going to take the night off. That was around six o'clock. He told me he'd get here when he caught up with

whatever he found at his apartment. It was a little after eight when he got here." She shook her head. "I don't understand why Norman's relationship with me would supply the police with a motive."

"You were Hansbury's wife," I said. "Hansbury may have objected to Norman's being here. He evidently knew Norman was coming here last night. The police will assume they quarreled about it and Norman, who has been doing research on karate, chopped him down. Hansbury did know Norman was coming here. He tried to phone Norman here, didn't he?"

"Yes. About an hour before Norman got here."

"Was he angry?"

"Frank?" She laughed, and it had a hurt sound to it. "He was angry because he couldn't find Norman, but not because Norman might have been here. He couldn't have cared less."

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. "How long have you and Hansbury been divorced, Gillian?"

"Three years," she said.

"Did he have another girl?"

"Girls," she said, tightlipped. "Girls—plural."

"That was the difficulty? Other women?"

"Frank's business brings him into constant contact with a

long stream of glamor," she said. "He should never have married me or anyone else. I should have known it but I—"

"You were in love with him?"

"God help me."

"But it was all over."

"For Frank," she said.

"And you, too. I mean, there is Norman—"

"Norman is a very sweet guy," she said. She put out her half-smoked cigarette with rather elaborate punchings into the ashtray. "He became a client of Frank's about six months before we were divorced. Norman sympathized with me. He knew I was the one who was hurt. He used to drop around about once a week or so for almost a year—just to see how I was. A good friend. He took me to dinner or the theater once in a while. That was all. Then—"

She drew a deep breath and went on. "Then one night we went to an opening and sat around with friends at Sardi's waiting for the reviews. It was a hit and we all got a little high. Norman brought me home early in the morning and—well, I was grateful to him and it was about time I—I started to think about living again. That's when it began. Not a love affair, but a pleasant sort of now-and-then thing. That's all it's ever been."

She looked around the room. "It's saved me from being mauled and clawed and slobbered over by half the wolves in town. Norman has supplied me with what I needed to stay on some kind of an even keel. And I think I've supplied Norman with something that's made him happy without any chains, rules or obligations."

"And Hansbury didn't care?"

"He didn't care," she said, her voice unsteady. "I see him—I've seen him from time to time. He invites me to lunch, all very gay, very casual, very civilized. He teased me about Norman. Three or four times—" She stopped.

"Yes?" I said.

"Frank had to keep all the bases touched," she said bitterly. "I think he went back to every woman he'd ever made love to, periodically, just to reassure himself that he was irresistible. Three or four times he came back to me, and God help me, I played his game. I helped to reassure him. I guess I'm the kind of nitwit who can only fall really in love once. I guess I used to dream that I'd be so fantastically wonderful that he'd come back to me to stay."

She looked away. "I must not have been." Then she looked straight at me. "You

must have noticed that I'd been crying just before you came in. You see—you see, in spite of everything I loved that miserable two-timer. Only three nights ago—oh, God, Mark!"

She broke down into uncontrolled weeping. She got up and hurried into what I assumed was the bedroom. I felt a little uncomfortable, as though she'd told me more than she meant to. I found myself thinking of the late Frank Hansbury in just the terms she'd applied to him—a miserable two-timer. You didn't play put-and-take with a girl like Gillian. How what she'd told me affected Norman's position I wasn't quite sure. Certainly Hansbury hadn't given a damn what happened to Gillian except as it satisfied his own ego. If she had to, Gillian could make it quite clear that Hansbury would have had no reason to be jealous of or to quarrel with Norman over her.

She came back from the other room, the ravages of tears skillfully repaired. She held her lovely head high and proud.

"I apologize, Mark," she said. "I told you things I couldn't even tell Norman because I—I had to, somehow. I had to tell someone, just once. But now let's think how we can help Norman. If he needs the alibi, of course I'll provide it.

And I think I can convince your policemen that I'm the last thing in the world they'd have quarreled about. You and I know that Norman couldn't possibly kill anybody. He's a gentle sweet nice guy. But there are other people in the picture who aren't."

"The fantasy world of Robert Saville," I said.

"Which is also the fantasy world of Thomas James Carson and his vice-presidents and George Brimsek and Karl Richter. The other night when Frank was here—" She hesitated, color coming into her pale cheeks, then went on. "The other night Frank told me a good deal about things. We always used to talk shop in the old days. I know things about the great T. James Carson and his vice-presidents and Bob Saville and Brimsek and all the others that would curl your hair."

"And Frank knew a great deal more than I do, Mark. He once said to me, joking, that if he found himself doing badly as a talent agent he could turn blackmailer and become a millionaire." She frowned and reached for a cigarette. "Frank was in a real mess with all of them over this job of Norman's. They were blandly trying to cheat Norman out of a lot of money. The first thing I

thought, when I heard about Frank, was that in the heat of an argument he'd threatened someone with one of his special little tidbits and there'd been an explosion."

"What kind of things do you know about them?" I asked.

"My things are nothing," she said. "Gossip about affairs, who's queer, who's virile, who's not. What Frank had was the real stuff—business deals that won't bear scrutiny, black-listings that would outrage the public if they became known, tax dodges that wouldn't stand investigation, under-the-table bribes to city officials, stuff in the small print of contracts that quietly crucify decent people. If Frank aimed one of those guns at somebody in an argument—" She shrugged.

The telephone rang and she reached out to the side table and answered it. She looked at me.

"For you," she said.

Only one person in the world knew where I was. Chambrun's voice sounded cold-angry.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"You'd better get back here on the double," he said. "Someone tried to throw your friend Norman out the window of your apartment."

"Tried?" I said.

"Norman's pretty badly shaken up, but all right."

"Who was it?"

"Stocking mask over his face," Chambrun said. His tone was bitter. "Maybe it was The Masked Crusader. He got away."

It was about five P.M. when Pierre Chambrun phoned me. It seems that about quarter-past four, while I'd been sitting talking to Gillian, the red light on the switchboard flickered, indicating that the receiver had been lifted in my rooms. The operator plugged in with the standard, "Yes, please."

No one spoke but she heard a kind of muffled gasping, then suddenly a man's voice, some distance from the instrument shouted, "Help!" The switchboard girl signaled Mrs. Veach, the chief operator, who also plugged in, listened, and instantly put in an emergency call to Jerry Dodd. By some miracle she found him on her first ring to his office.

"There's some kind of struggle going on in Room 409," Mrs. Veach told Jerry. "Phone must have been knocked over and we can hear what sounds like fighting—and a man calling for help. It's Mr. Haskell's apartment—"

Jerry didn't wait to hear what Mrs. Veach thought. His

own office was in the lobby. He flagged Johnny Thacker, the bell captain, as he raced for the elevators. It was only three or four minutes from the time the cry for help had come over the wire until Jerry and Johnny burst into my apartment.

The living room was a shambles. The card table with Norman's typewriter on it had been overturned. The big overstuffed armchair lay on its back. The telephone on the end table by the couch was on the floor, the receiver off its cradle. The window overlooking the street was wide-open. I think I've said it was a brisk fall day, and by that time in the afternoon the wind through the curtains had a touch of winter's chill in it.

Sprawled in a sitting position under the window, on the floor, was Norman. A little trickle of blood ran out of one corner of his mouth. He looked at Jerry, glassy-eyed as a fighter who has been down for the count. The front of his shirt was ripped and Jerry could see an ugly scratch on his chest, as if he'd been clawed.

Johnny Thacker closed the window and between them they helped Norman to his feet and over to the armchair which Jerry had righted.

"What happened, Mr. Geller?" Jerry asked.

Johnny Thacker put the phone back on its cradle, ending Mrs. Veach's participation.

Norman moved his head from side to side gingerly, as if he wasn't sure it was still attached to his neck. "Some lunatic barged in here—kind of stocking mask pulled over his head—just charged at me. I—I wasn't ready for him— He dragged me over to the window—got it open and started to heave me out."

My rooms are on the fourth floor, but the fourth floor is six levels above the street. You don't get up and walk from that height.

"I—I know a little about karate," Norman said. "I just did manage to clip him one in the throat and that sent him back away from me, choking. I tried to make it to the door but he was on me like a wildcat. I had half a chance now because I was ready, but he was no dummy. He knew the holds, too. You—you can see." He waved around the room. "I threw him once and that knocked the telephone loose. I figured I wasn't going to make it, so I started yelling for help, hoping the operator would hear me."

"She did. That's how we got here," Jerry said.

"He pulled me over by the window again," Norman said. "I managed to get in a good

kick to his kneecap. I could hear him gasp with pain and he staggered back. I saw the counterpunch coming to my windpipe and I managed to tuck in my chin. His punch was like the kick of a mule and I went down—and partly out, I guess. The next thing—you were coming through the door."

Jerry did all the right things. He notified Chambrun and sent a man looking for Hardy. He sent for Doc Partridge, the house physician. He ordered Johnny to stop handling things in the room. He got a wet towel for Norman to use on his cut mouth and scratched chest.

Chambrun and Hardy arrived together in a few minutes during which time Norman wasn't able to contribute anything more to Jerry. His description of the man was vague—big, powerfully built, strong hands, reasonably gifted in the techniques of karate. He had no look at all at the stocking-covered face.

Chambrun was solicitous. "You're not badly hurt, Norman?"

"Nothing broken—I think," Norman said. "I'm one solid ache, I don't mind saying."

"How did he get in?" Hardy asked.

"Through the door. I was sitting at my typewriter and he just barged in."

"Door wasn't locked?"

"Of course it was locked," Norman said. His eyes widened. "Sure it was locked. I was keeping people out of here. That's a joke, son."

"Did you hear someone turning a key in the lock?" Hardy asked.

"No-o," Norman said. "But I was typing pretty steadily—redoing a page of dialogue. If he was quiet about it I—I might not have heard. I was concentrating—"

Hardy looked at Jerry Dodd. "Hotel thief?" he asked.

"Not ever," Jerry said. "A guy standing outside the door with a passkey, let's say, would hear the typewriter going. A thief wouldn't come into a room he knew was occupied."

"He was no thief," Norman agreed. "He was out to get me. I was supposed to get heaved out the window."

"Why?" Hardy asked.

"I've been thinking," Norman said. "Boy, have I been thinking!"

"With what results, Norman?" Chambrun asked patiently.

"If I went out the window—and there was a little note in my typewriter saying I killed Frank Hansbury and couldn't face it any longer—well, a lot of people would be off a great big hook, wouldn't they?"

Hardy's face was grim. "Could it have been Robert Saville?" he asked.

Norman shook his head. "Not tall enough. Saville's quick and wiry. This man was square and all power."

"Brimsek, the athlete-lawyer?"

Norman grinned and winced. Smiling hurt his mouth. "Not George," he said. "He taught me all I know about karate. I couldn't begin to handle him."

It didn't take long for Hardy to get up a full head of steam. He and Chambrun went quickly to Saville's suite on the nineteenth floor, leaving Norman to gather the scattered pages of his script.

Saville was definitely not alone. Paul Drott, the Network vice-president, was there, and Brimsek, and Sally Bevans busy at a typewriter, and a young man who was introduced as Walter Cameron. Saville had already got in his new writer and they were deep in what is called a "story conference."

"I just can't stop to talk to you now, Lieutenant," Saville said. "We're revising the script. It has to be ready by Monday. Unless it's absolutely necessary—"

"It is," Hardy said.

"Does Norman know he's not the writer any more?" Chambrun asked.

"There's always more than one writer," Saville said. "If Norman comes up with something good, fine. But we can't risk it. Wally, here, is—"

"What about Richter?" Chambrun asked. "Doesn't the director usually sit in on story conferences?"

"Nuts to Karl," Saville said impatiently. "He's always trying to work in Significance! This is a straight adventure series. It doesn't have any message except good is good and evil is evil."

"Someone just tried to murder Norman," Chambrun said, as casually as if he were commenting on what a nice afternoon it had been. It was a neat little bombshell. "Evil is evil," Chambrun added.

"Who did it?" the vice-president asked in a small voice.

"It could have been The Masked Crusader," Chambrun said. "Stocking mask over his head and skilled in karate. He tried to throw Norman out the window."

"Knock it off," Saville said angrily. "I'm not interested in gags, Chambrun."

"It's not a gag," Chambrun said. "It just happened—half an hour ago."

A broad smile lit George Brimsek's face. He glanced at his watch. "It is now 5:33," he said. "We began this conference

at about three o'clock. Not one of us has been out of this suite since then—not even out of this room except to go to the john. Will that speed you on your way, gentlemen? We have work to do."

"I have been in this business a long time," Hardy said in a harsh voice. "I don't think I've ever run across such callous attitudes as I've found in this room. Don't you even want to know whether or not your writer is hurt?"

"Of course we want to know," Sally Bevans said quickly.

"He was pretty badly beaten up but he's all right," Hardy said. He fixed Brimsek with a cold stare. "You're the karate expert around here, Brimsek."

"I've just told you, Lieutenant, none of us has been out of this suite since three o'clock."

"Geller has already told us it wasn't you or Saville. Man was a different build and not so expert as you, Brimsek."

"Well, bully for Norman," Brimsek said.

"Why would anyone want to hurt Norman?" Sally asked.

"The suggestion," Chambrun said, "is that the man who attacked him intended to throw him out the window and leave a suicide note in Norman's typewriter, confessing to the murder of Hansbury. That would have

ended the murder investigation, got you all off any sort of hook you may be on, and allow *The Masked Crusader* to be born, unhampered by unpleasant publicity."

"So it didn't work. But how do you tie us into it, Chambrun? We were here. Our hands are clean."

"There is enough money interest in this room to hire a hundred assassins," Chambrun said.

"Oh, my God!" the vice-president said. "I think I better call T.J."

"You just sit tight, Paul," Saville said. "This whole story sounds as if it just came out of Norman's typewriter."

Hardy gave the actor a disgusted look. "It wasn't his typewriter that slugged him in the jaw and clawed his chest," he said. "I'm sending a police stenographer in here to take individual statements from each of you, stating that you didn't leave this suite between 3:00 and 5:30 P.M."

"We don't have to sign statements, do we, George?" Saville asked.

The muscular lawyer shrugged. "Here or at the precinct station house," he said. "Please, let's get it over with as quickly as possible, Lieutenant. We're running out of time on a very important project."

Just about the time I got back from Gillian's apartment, Chambrun, Hardy, and Jerry Dodd had returned to the great man's office.

Jerry was reporting. "I've checked out the floor maids, the housekeeper for that area, bellhops, elevator operators. No one saw anyone come to or leave Mark's apartment—no reason anyone should have particularly. Certainly the guy took off his mask before he came out of the apartment. Nothing to make him stand out from anyone else."

"Except a limp," Chambrun said. "Norman gave him a flying kick in the kneecap. Norman knows how. The man is lucky his leg wasn't broken."

"I've still got to round up that fellow Richter," Hardy said. He was studying his notebook.

"He's in the Trapeze Bar," Jerry said, "or was about fifteen minutes ago. Been in and out of there most of the afternoon. According to Mr. Del Greco, the Captain in the Trapeze, he must have taken on quite a snootful by now. Not showing it, though."

Chambrun is Chambrun. He didn't ask me a single question about my visit with Gillian while Hardy was there.

"We'll have to move your friend somewhere," Haskell,

Hardy said. "I'd like to turn my boys loose in your living room. Geller's attacker must have left a few fingerprints around."

"He can use Miss Ruysdale's office until your men are finished with Mark's place," Chambrun said.

"I'll get him," Jerry Dodd said. "I'd like to ask him some more questions. He didn't see the man's face on account of the mask, but there are other things he might remember now that the excitement's over. There could have been something distinctive about the hands—a scar, a broken finger, the color of the hair growing on them. There might have been a smell—the hair tonic he used. And the suit. What color? What kind of material? Shoes? We might begin to build a picture."

"Go ahead," Hardy said. "I'll have Richter brought up here. He may have some ideas."

"Oh, yes, he'll be full of ideas," Chambrun said. He walked over to the sideboard and filled a demitasse cup from the Turkish coffee machine.

Jerry and Hardy took off.

"Well?" Chambrun said to me.

I gave him a blow-by-blow of my talk with Gillian. He listened, eyes hooded, sunk back down in his desk chair.

"The alibi doesn't quite make it for Norman," he said

when I'd finished. "Six until a little past eight."

"He was at his apartment."

"You've asked him?"

"No. I came straight here. How is he?"

"He'll do," Chambrun said. "Gutsy little guy. From the looks of things he fought like a tiger."

"Somebody is trying to pin the tail on the donkey—Norman," I said.

"It has all the earmarks," Chambrun agreed.

Hardy was suddenly back with a couple of typewritten sheets of paper in his hand.

"How do you like this for apples?" he said. "Something we missed in Geller's room—1927. Camera picked it up. Wheel marks on the carpet in the room."

"Come again," Chambrun said.

"Wheel marks! Narrow, rubber-tired wheel marks. A wheel chair!" Hardy said. "There was a wheel chair in that room carrying weight. Someone riding in it."

We had Norman in there fast. He looked a little pale and disheveled. He kept blotting at the corner of his mouth with a bloodied handkerchief.

"We've come up with something," Hardy told him. "Yesterday afternoon, while you were still in your room, did

Saville come to see you?"

Norman shook his head slowly. "They wore out the telephone but I wasn't letting anyone in. I was trying to finish."

"Saville didn't come to see you in his wheel chair?"

"You mean that gimmick he uses for going out through the crowds? No."

"Some other time that day?"

"No. He wouldn't have to disguise himself to come and talk to me. What's up?"

Hardy showed Norman the homicide report. "There was a wheel chair in your room since the last time the maid cleaned and vacuumed."

Norman's face was blank. "Certainly not while I was there," he said. Then his eyes widened. "Do you suppose that's the way they brought Frank's body into my room?"

For the first time since Frank Hansbury's body had been found in Norman's closet we had a break in the case. It came as a result of Hardy's efficient homicide team which had detected the wheel marks on the carpet, and Jerry Dodd's dogged legwork. Jerry found a witness on the hotel staff—Mrs. Kniffin, the housekeeper on the nineteenth floor.

Mrs. Kniffin is a motherly

type who has worked in the Beaumont as far back as the memory of anyone connected with the hotel. In those years Mrs. Kniffin has encountered all the "unexpecteds." Jerry brought her to Chambrun's office where she had a story for us.

"Mrs. Kniffin saw the wheel chair go into Room 1927," Jerry said.

Mrs. Kniffin's plump face showed wrinkles of distress. "I hope I didn't do wrong not reporting it, Mr. Chambrun," she said. "It—it seemed perfectly all right."

"I'm sure your judgment was perfectly sound, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said. "Just tell us what you saw."

Mrs. Kniffin's arthritic fingers twisted the apron of her housekeeper's gray uniform. "That whole corridor was kind of exciting, Mr. Chambrun. Actors and actresses, writers, big-time advertising executives, all scurrying back and forth between the rooms. And, of course, specially Robert Saville. I mean, things were more interesting than usual."

"Robert Saville is a favorite of yours, Mrs. Kniffin?"

Mrs. Kniffin giggled. "I'm too old to admit it," she said. "Spencer Tracy stayed on my floor once. It was a little bit like that."

"For God's sake, get to the wheel chair, woman," Hardy said.

"Let her tell it her own way, Lieutenant," Chambrun suggested, giving Mrs. Kniffin an encouraging smile.

"It was last night," Mrs. Kniffin said, "just before I went off duty."

"Which is when, Mrs. Kniffin?" Chambrun asked for Hardy's benefit.

"Eight o'clock. I always go off at exactly eight. Mrs. Lawler, who takes over, is never late. I guess it must have been about ten minutes to eight. I was in the hall and the door of Mr. Saville's suite opened and they brought him out in that wheel chair."

"Him?"

"Mr. Saville," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I'd seen him before in the wheel chair. It's wonderful what he can do with make-up. He wears a gray hairpiece and black glasses and his overcoat collar turned up around his chin—black hat. You'd never dream it was him. He gets wheeled right by people and they don't even look at him. A regular Lon Chaney, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," Chambrun said. "Naturally, you were fascinated when you saw him being wheeled out of his suite last night."

Mrs. Kniffin lowered her eyes. "I have to admit I pretended being busy about something near the linen closet."

"Quite natural," Chambrun said. "After all, Mr. Saville is a kind of hero to you. Who, by the way, was pushing the chair, Mrs. Kniffin?"

"Why—why, one of his people, I suppose," she said.

"You suppose?"

Mrs. Kniffin looked positively kittenish. "I really didn't notice," she said. "A man wearing a raincoat and a hat, I think. But I really didn't notice, Mr. Chambrun. I—I was so interested in Mr. Saville and how he managed his—his disguise."

"So they came out of Mr. Saville's suite. You're sure of that?"

"Of course, sir. I thought they'd be going past me to the elevators, the way they always do when Mr. Saville wants to get out through the lobby without being noticed. But instead they stopped at the door of Room 1927." She glanced at Norman who was leaning forward in his chair, handkerchief pressed to his mouth. "Mr. Geller's room, sir."

"And then?"

"They went in," Mrs. Kniffin said. "Then I went into the linen room and Mrs. Lawler was there waiting to relieve me. I went right home."

"Let's not go home quite so fast, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said, his smile gentle. "You say they went into Room 1927. Did Mr. Saville knock on the door or ring the bell?"

"Oh, no, sir," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I was watching him every second. He never moved a muscle. Have you ever watched him in that wheel chair, Mr. Chambrun? He sits there like a statue. It must take wonderful physical control."

"So the other man—the one you don't remember—either knocked or rang the bell?"

"I suppose so," Mrs. Kniffin said. "I—I don't think I ever took my eyes off Mr. Saville. I mean—"

"I understand, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said. His patience bordered on the miraculous. "So someone opened the door and let them in?"

"The door opened and they went in," Mrs. Kniffin said.

"Did you see who opened it, Mrs. Kniffin? Was it Mr. Geller?"

She frowned. "I—I didn't actually see who opened it," she said.

"And you didn't actually see the man in the raincoat knock or ring the bell?"

"I have to admit I didn't," Mrs. Kniffin said.

"Could he have opened the door with a key, Mrs. Kniffin?"

Mrs. Kniffin stared at Chambrun. "I—I don't honestly know, sir," she said. "Only later, as you may know, Mrs. Lawler let Mr. Saville and his secretary into Mr. Geller's room. They thought something might have happened to Mr. Geller. They didn't have a key then, sir. Mrs. Lawler used her paskey. Mrs. Lawler said she was all goose bumps, standing right next to Mr. Saville, talking to him."

Chambrun picked up the phone on his desk. "Please ask Mr. Cardoza to come to my office at once," he said.

Mr. Cardoza is the Captain in the Grill Room where Robert Saville had, in theory, been having dinner at ten minutes to eight last night. Chambrun put down the phone and leaned back in his chair. He made a little gesture of resignation to Hardy. He, personally, was finished with Mrs. Kniffin.

"Try to think hard, Mrs. Kniffin," Hardy said. "Can't you describe the man who was pushing the wheel chair a little better than just a raincoat and a hat?"

"I know it's romantic and foolish," Mrs. Kniffin said, "but I just couldn't take my eyes off Mr. Saville."

"You're sure it *was* Mr. Saville in the wheel chair?"

Mrs. Kniffin smiled at the

lieutenant as though he were a backward child. "That is something I couldn't possibly be mistaken about, Lieutenant," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun said.

The old woman hesitated. "I hope I haven't gotten Mr. Saville into any kind of trouble," she said. "I'd—I'd never forgive myself for that."

"Comfort yourself that you've done your job as a member of the staff and as a good citizen, Mrs. Kniffin," Chambrun reassured her.

Mrs. Kniffin, twisting her apron, retired.

Hardy made a growling noise deep in his throat. "Now we got something to twist that fancy creep's arm with," he said.

"Meaning Saville?" Chambrun said, looking at the lieutenant through a pale cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Who else?" Hardy said.

"That may be the crucial question," Chambrun said. "Before you go too far out on a limb, Hardy, I suggest we hear what Mr. Cardoza has to say." His eyes moved past Hardy to the door.

Mr. Cardoza is dark and very elegant. He looks as if he might be the pretender to the Spanish throne. He is more than a head waiter. He presides over the Grill Room and the Blue La-

goon night club in the hotel. Real princes and kings speak nicely to him to get reservations. I know he rates with the top half dozen indispensables on Chambrun's staff.

He arrived promptly. At the Beaumont when you get a summons from the second floor you hop to it.

"Thank you for coming at once," Chambrun said.

"My pleasure," Cardoza said. He nodded to me and Hardy, whom he knew from other investigations. Chambrun introduced Norman, and Norman got the faint classic bow.

"Last night Robert Saville and some of his entourage had dinner in the Grill Room?" Chambrun asked.

One of Cardoza's eyebrows rose. "Indeed he did."

"Could you estimate the approximate time, Cardoza?"

"It would be exact on my table chart," Cardoza said. "They arrived a few minutes after seven and left about twenty-five minutes to nine."

"Any comings and goings?" Chambrun asked.

"How do you mean, Mr. Chambrun?"

"I won't play games with you, Cardoza. We are trying to account for Robert Saville's whereabouts between say half-past seven and a little after eight."

"He was with me—God help me," Cardoza said.

"Why do you need God's help, Cardoza?"

"He is an insatiable demander," Cardoza said. "Nothing is ever quite right. He drives my waiters crazy and he treats them like cattle."

"So he was with you from a little after seven till twenty-five minutes to nine. But he probably left the room at some point?"

"He did not," Cardoza said.  
"Not at any time?"

"Not at any time."

"How many people does your Grill Room seat, Cardoza?" Hardy asked.

"The fire laws limit us to two hundred and twenty-six people."

"Were you filled up last night?"

"We are always 'filled up,' Lieutenant."

"And you're trying to tell me that with over two hundred people in the room, all of them needing attention, you can say positively that Saville never left the room? Not even to go to the john?"

"I am telling you that," Cardoza said blandly.

"I don't buy it," Hardy said. "I don't buy it because we have an eyewitness who says he was somewhere else."

"Your eyewitness is mis-

taken," Cardoza said. He smiled, and it was just slightly patronizing. "If you were having dinner there, Lieutenant, I might not be able to swear that you hadn't left the room at some point. You are a pleasant, undemanding, reasonable guest. You would never produce unwanted publicity for the hotel. You could go to the john, as you call it, without creating a sensation.

"But Robert Saville can't push back his chair to stand up without six foolish women trying to rip the sleeve out of his dinner jacket. We have to protect him as best we can from autograph seekers and drooling ladies. Every moment he's in the room is potentially explosive. So in the case of Mr. Saville I know very definitely whether he leaves the room to go to the john or anywhere else. He is never quite out of the perimeter of my vision. Last night Mr. Saville did not leave from the moment he and his party arrived a little after seven until he and his party left at twenty-five minutes to nine."

"What about the others—the people with him?"

"The girl—Saville's secretary—made several trips to the telephone booths in the foyer. Mr. Drott, whom I know well as a regular customer—the Network has an account with us—

also made several phone calls. The big man, the lawyer, went to the washroom once. But Robert Saville never left the table."

"Thank you, Cardoza," Chambrun said.

Cardoza bowed. "Any time, Mr. Chambrun," he said, and left.

"He's wrong or Mrs. Kniffin is lying!" Hardy said, his anger boiling.

"I think you can be quite certain that Cardoza is right," Chambrun said. "As for Mrs. Kniffin, she wanted it to be Robert Saville in that wheel chair and so she saw Robert Saville in that wheel chair. A man wearing a gray wig, black glasses, with his face hidden by a hatbrim and a turned-up coat collar doesn't present a sharp picture. Even I might look like Robert Saville in that get-up, slumped in a wheel chair, to someone who wanted me to be Robert Saville."

"So much for eyewitnesses," Hardy muttered.

"I think you can depend on Cardoza as a completely accurate witness," Chambrun said.

"Then exactly who was in the wheel chair? And who was pushing it?"

"Norman's suggestion still interests me," Chambrun said. "It could have been Frank Hansbury on his way to be

dumped in Norman's closet. He sat there 'like a statue,' Mrs. Kniffin said. Might that not describe a dead man, Lieutenant?"

"And the man in the raincoat and hat—since you're guessing?" Hardy asked with some bitterness.

"In Mrs. Kniffin's ecstatic state, which makes her totally worthless as a witness, the man in the raincoat and hat could have been a woman."

"What makes you think so?"

"Nothing," Chambrun said, smiling. "I just say it could have been for all the solid facts we have. But you do have a new starting point, Lieutenant."

"Like what?"

"Like Robert Saville," Chambrun said. "Mrs. Kniffin isn't all that worthless to you, Lieutenant. One thing you can be sure of. She *did* see someone in a wheel chair, disguised in Saville's wig and glasses. She *did* see someone pushing the chair. She *did* see them go into—or be let into—Norman's room. So now you go to Saville and ask him who used his wheel chair and his makeup kit while he was having dinner. Where are those items now? That's a starting point, my friend."

Hardy straightened his shoulders. "This time Pretty Boy is going to sit down and dish it out for me if it takes all night."

"Remember, Brimsek told us that after they had gone into Norman's room with the house-keeper at a quarter to ten, Saville went out in the wheel chair looking 'for action.' Namely, a poker game. Did he find his wig and glasses where they should have been? Was the wheel chair where it ought to have been?"

"There could still be finger-prints on those items," Hardy said hopefully.

Chambrun shook his head. "Mrs. Kniffin didn't say so but I'd make a small bet the man in the raincoat wore gloves."

Hardy started for the door.

"Just a minute, Lieutenant," Norman said in a small tired voice. "I was lucky this last time. I might not be lucky if they come looking for me again."

Hardy nodded. "You're right. You'll have to stay here till we've given Mark's place a thorough going-over. I'll send a man in here to stand by with you. Detective named Salinger. He's a hundred percent reliable. You want your typewriter in here?"

Norman's smile was pale. "I think I'm pretty fed up with The Masked Crusader," he said. "He got a little bit too real up there in Mark's place."

Hardy took off for his confrontation with Saville. Norman

didn't move out of his chair. He lowered his head and covered his face with his hands.

"I—I think things are beginning to catch up with me," Norman said. "Poor Frank. Do you really think he might have been in that wheel chair?"

"It was your idea," Chambrun said.

Norman shuddered. "But I didn't really believe it," he said.

Chambrun lit one of his flat Egyptian cigarettes. "I think we'd better bring you up to date, Norman," he said. "Mark has been to see Mrs. Hansbury."

Norman's head jerked up. "So help me, Mark, if you've dragged her into this—"

"She hasn't been dragged anywhere," Chambrun said. "Mark is very much concerned about you. He's a good friend, Norman. He felt someone is trying to frame you and that you'd almost certainly need the alibi that Mrs. Hansbury could give you. He wanted to make certain she'd come forward if she was needed."

"And of course she said she would," Norman said. "But that would mean—"

"It may not be necessary for her to come forward," Chambrun said. "There's a small hitch, though. Mrs. Hansbury told Mark you got to her place a little after eight. You told us you left here about six. Obvi-

ously she can't provide you with an alibi for that stretch of time in between—six to eight. That could be the crucial time, Norman."

"I went to my apartment—near Gramercy Park," Norman said. "I hadn't picked up mail for days and I needed some fresh clothes."

"Did anyone see you there?"

Norman frowned. "I can't honestly be sure," he said. "It's a self-service building. I—I wasn't trying to set up an alibi, you know."

"Let's hope it isn't too important," Chambrun said. He watched the smoke rise from the end of his cigarette. "We're left a little bit high and dry, Norman. Take a look at what we know. Hansbury was in Saville's suite arguing about your payments when they went down to dinner leaving him there. That was a few minutes past seven. Hansbury was still alive then—Sheri Southworth saw him. He made a phone call to Mrs. Hansbury, trying to find you. Now Saville, Brimsek, Drott, and Miss Bevans are all in the clear for the next hour and a half. At ten minutes to eight Mrs. Kniffin saw a phony Saville go into your room. That may have been Frank Hansbury, dead, wheeled into your room by Mr. X. If it was Hansbury he wasn't killed by Saville

or Brimsek or Drott—or Miss Bevans. I'm disinclined to believe that Miss Sheri Southworth is a mankiller—in the literal sense."

Chambrun smiled faintly, then went on. "So that brings me to the key question, Norman. Who else in this entourage could have got into an angry argument with Hansbury and chopped him down? Because that seems to me to be what happened. Not a planned killing—an explosive, unplanned moment of violence."

"Only Sheri was in the suite," Norman said.

"We don't know that," Chambrun said. "Hansbury was there and Sheri was in her room. If someone rang the doorbell Hansbury could obviously have let that someone in."

Norman nodded, moistening his lips. "Frank was furious with everyone. But the person he hated most in the whole setup was Karl Richter," he said.

"Oh?"

"Richter was the one who was really fouling up the script," Norman said. "Karl and his bloody 'significances.' Just when we'd get Saville and the rest of them to agree about a sequence, Karl would blow it for us. He's a crazy egomaniac. He doesn't care about anyone's

ideas but his own. He thinks directors are the only important people in show business. If he happened to turn up while Frank was there in the suite they could certainly have got in an argument."

"He wasn't in the hotel," I said.

"He *says* he wasn't in the hotel," Chambrun said. He looked at Norman. "Is he a karate expert, Norman?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Norman said.

"Mark, it might be worth having a casual conversation with Richter," Chambrun said. "If he's still in the Trapeze Bar and he isn't too stoned you might be able to find out where he was last night between seven and eight without his thinking he was talking to the police. Use your best diplomatic technique."

The Trapeze Bar is suspended in space over the foyer to the Beaumont's Grand Ball Room. Its walls are a kind of Florentine grillework, and some artist of the Calder school has decorated them with mobiles of circus performers working on trapezes. They sway slightly in the movement of air from a cooling system, giving the unusual effect that the whole place is swaying slightly. It's an extremely popular rendezvous

for the famous and the near-famous before the lunch and dinner hours.

It was nearly six o'clock when I got there and the room was crowded to the doors. I flagged Mr. Del Greco, the Captain, and he pointed out Richter at a corner table.

"I was about to give him the polite heave-ho," Del Greco said. "He has to be potted to the eyes. He's been here for nearly four hours taking in one after another—Dutch gin on the rocks."

Richter wasn't alone. Sally Bevans was with him.

"Well, well, well," Richter said when I joined them. "The Beaumont's barker." He was deathly pale but he seemed in control.

Miss Bevans smiled at me. "I finally got that martini," she said. "On the run."

"Sorry I couldn't have hosted it for you," I said.

"Join us, by all means," Richter said as I pulled up a chair. "I have been summoned by the Mafia—my name for Saville and Company. I have been explaining to Sally that I'm not exactly in tip-top condition to involve myself in a story conference."

"They need you, Karl," Sally said. "Wally Cameron has come up with a whole new opening sequence."

"Convey the word that I need a little time for rehabilitation," Richter said. "A lot of hot coffee, a lot of cold shower—shall we say, after they've had dinner?"

"I'll report," Sally said. "But I have the feeling they'll descend on you *en masse* when Lieutenant Hardy is through with them."

"So the Law is still chasing its tail," Richter said. "Running in circles can last a long time—long enough for a lot of cold showers. Convey the word, Sally, my dear. Richter will come when Richter is damned good and ready."

Sally made a little moue and stood up. "I'll report," she said.

"Do so," Richter said. "And then rejoin us, my dear, and I'll persuade you to desert the Mafia and become a Rhinemaiden." He watched her go, moistening his thin lips. "A really lovely gal," he said. "How is it they so seldom recognize the genuine male as opposed to the counterfeit?" He looked up at the waiter standing by the table. "Once more, please, and whatever Mr. Haskell's little heart desires."

I saw the waiter was about to deliver an ultimatum from Del Greco and shook my head. One more couldn't do that much damage. I looked at Richter. All that was missing

was the Heidelberg scar to make him the perfect Prussian prototype.

"This is a wonderful, a magical bar," he said. "I've sat here all afternoon and the grapevine entwines itself around my ears and bit by bit I am completely up on current events. I hear the rumor that someone tried to throw little Norman out the window."

"It's not a rumor," I said. "It was a near thing." I found myself looking at his well-manicured nails and wondered if they could have clawed at Norman's chest.

"The police seem unwilling to accept expert help," Richter said. He looked at me hard, as though he had difficulty focusing. I expect he did. "I told you the Mafia would stop at nothing to keep the finger pointed away from them. Your square policeman seems to have rejected that idea."

"Alibis," I said. "The Mafia, as you call them, left Hansbury alive in Saville's suite when they went to dinner. He was dead, according to the Medical Examiner, by the time they got back. They were all accounted for the entire time. You weren't in the hotel," I added, slipping it in as casually as I could.

"That's correct," he said. "I was not in the hotel. I was on the other side of town having

dinner with my cameraman and my set designer—at Sardi's." His eyes narrowed. "Were you trying to get me to provide myself with an alibi, Mr. Haskell?"

"Why should I?" I said, trying to look fatuous.

"Well, no matter. I have one. But I very much wonder about the Mafia. Conspiracy, conspiracy. They say they left Hansbury alive. They say."

"Sheri saw him alive after they left. He made phone calls."

"That pet poodle will say anything she is told to say," Richter said. "She's got the bruises to prove it. Conspiracy, my dear fellow. The Mafia is expert at it."

I wondered how much I should tell him. His theory had little needles pricking at my spine. "At ten minutes of eight somebody wheeled a man out of the suite wearing Saville's wig—his invalid disguise—and into Norman's room. We wonder if that was Hansbury's body."

"Now you're getting interesting," Richter said.

"But they were all in the Grill Room," I said. "So who did the wheeling?"

"My dear innocent," Richter said, obviously enjoying himself, "it is perfectly simple. There are presidents and vice-presidents at their beck and call. They phone. 'We have had

a little accident,' they say. 'We have killed Frank Hansbury. We need to plant his body in Norman's room. Please send someone around to wheel him in.' 'Yes, sir. Right away, sir.' And so they go to dinner, cool as the cliché cucumber. Help arrives. Miss Sheri admits him. Frank Hansbury is dumped. Kaput."

"Hansbury made a phone call after they were in the Grill Room," I said. "We know that for a fact."

"Do you, Haskell?" His smile was twisted. "The Mafia includes among its cohorts actors, mimics. Is the person who got the phone call absolutely sure the voice wasn't an imitation?"

I almost said she ought to know—she was his wife. I didn't. What I did say was: "It's an interesting idea."

"But hard for the square policeman to absorb, or prove, I imagine."

I tried the fatuous smile again. "While we're setting up alibis, where were you at four thirty when someone was trying to toss Norman out my window?"

Richter laughed. He waved toward the bar. "Check with your elegant Captain over there. He's been hating me since two o'clock this afternoon." He looked at the drink the waiter had brought him and shud-

dered. "I think I have over-estimated myself," he said.

At that point Sally Bevans returned from the phones in the foyer. "I'm sorry," she said. "The words are 'urgent,' 'immediate,' 'pronto.'

His pale eyes looked her up and down as though he could see through the chic beige dress. "What a pity," he said. "You could provide the one sure way to revive me, my dear." He stood up abruptly and I just managed to stop his chair from toppling over. "Do you think I might avail myself of your steamroom and shower baths up at the squash courts?" he asked me.

"Be my guest."

"Thanks." He laughed. "Remember, the Mafia is all-powerful, Haskell." He walked away, stiff-legged, a little uncertain.

"Can I buy you that martini now?" I asked Sally.

She sat down beside me. "I always feel I'm being man-handled when he just looks at me," she said.

I signaled the waiter. Something told me I ought to stop playing detective, but Richter, drunk as he was, had suggested something not out of the realm of possibility. I wondered if this cool chick beside me could be sitting on the truth about a murder. I wanted to call Gillian to ask her if she was quite sure

it was Frank who had talked to her on the phone, but I also thought I might not have another chance to catch Sally Bevans off guard.

"Richter isn't very friendly to your boss," I said.

"Karl is a Grade-A louse," she said. "He is also a Grade-A director. This business is full of talented louses—or is it lice?"

I gave the waiter the order for two very dry vodka martinis on the rocks.

"Richter keeps trying to point us toward your boss and his friends," I said.

She looked at me, frowning. "It's absurd, you know. We all have alibis for both times—the time Frank was killed and this afternoon when Norman was attacked. You know that, Mark."

"Richter thinks we may not be asking about the right times," I said.

"What other times are there?" she asked. She didn't seem remotely disturbed. The waiter brought our martinis, and we clicked glasses and sipped.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" I said.

"Ask away," she said.

"When you all went down to dinner last night Hansbury was in Saville's suite?"

"You want me to be very precise, don't you, Mark?"

"Yes, I do."

"I went downstairs ahead of Bob and the others—to make sure about the table reservation in the Grill Room. Frank was there when I left, arguing with Bob and George and Paul Drott."

"How much later did they come down to the Grill Room?"

"Oh, fifteen minutes," she said without hesitation. Then her clear gray eyes contracted. "Are you suggesting that something happened to Frank during that time?"

"Richter suggests it."

"That worm," she said.

"He calls your outfit the Mafia."

"I know." She sipped her drink. "You halfway buy it, don't you?"

"When you're trying to put a puzzle together and there's no glimmer of light—" I shrugged.

"From what I've seen of you, Mark, I write you down as a very nice guy," she said. "The way you've stood by Norman."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And you're not simple-minded, Mark. You couldn't be and hold your job with Chambrun, who's certainly not simple-minded. You know something about the importance of public relations and publicity. That's your job. Nobody who isn't in the business can quite

understand what the wrong kind of publicity can do to a man in Bob Saville's position. Or how important good publicity is to him and everybody connected with him."

"He's the golden-egg layer for a lot of people," I said.

"He is that," she said.

"He plays it pretty dangerously," I said, "carting Miss Sheri Southworth around the country with him."

Her lips compressed. "Richter *has* been talking to you," she said.

"Well, she is a little risky, isn't she?"

Sally sat very still, turning her cocktail glass round and round in her fingers.

"I understand the kind of special love affair that girls have with the boss," I said, "even though it isn't for real. But let's face it. Saville's practising a kind of brinkmanship, wouldn't you say? When something serious, like Frank Hansbury's murder, comes on the scene he's got to think of covering up so much else."

"I suppose you could say that I love Bob Saville," she said. "I've been with him for nine years—first as a script girl and then as his personal secretary. I know all the good things about him, and all the bad things. I know all his weaknesses and strengths, all his

fears, all his dreams. They total up to something, Mark. If he wasn't always in technicolor, always in the public spotlight, he'd be just another ordinary guy with ordinary weaknesses and fears. And dreams. That's how I see him, working with him every day. Would it surprise you if I told you I'd cut off my right arm for him if he asked it?"

"Knowing you, even as slightly as I do, it would," I said.

"What did Richter tell you about Sheri?"

"I don't think you're old enough to have it repeated," I said, grinning at her.

"Whatever he told you, it isn't true," she said.

"Since you don't know what he told me, how can you be sure?"

"I know Karl," she said. "Louse is too kind a word." She glanced at her small jeweled wrist watch. "Oh, brother, I was supposed to report back on Richter's availability. Would you excuse me a moment?"

She went off to the phones in the foyer again.

I signaled the waiter and asked him to bring a phone to the table. I'd written down Gillian's number when I got her address out of the phone book. When the waiter brought the phone and plugged it in I dialed

Gillian. She answered at once.

"Mark Haskell here," I said. "I have to ask you something in a hurry, Gillian. Are you *sure* it was Frank who called you last night asking for Norman?"

"Of course I'm *sure*."

"It's been suggested that it might have been someone imitating Frank's voice." She was silent for so long that I said, "Are you there, Gillian?"

"Yes, I'm here. I was trying to remember what he said. He asked me if Norman had got here yet. I said no. He said to tell Norman he wanted to talk to him. And then, in that snide way of his, he said, 'And have fun, baby.' Yes, it was Frank."

"Well, thanks anyway," I said. "I'll explain it to you when I see you."

I saw Sally coming toward me from the foyer. So much for a faked phone call. But the question of times was still complicated. Maybe, after that, Frank had had his fatal argument with someone who had not yet gone to dinner. It could have happened that way. Sheri's testimony that she'd been alone with him could be part of the conspiracy.

"It's a good thing I called," Sally said as she rejoined me. "Lieutenant Hardy wants you up there in Bob's suite. Shall we go?"

I was playing cops and rob-

bers and I was in love with it. But I was an amateur. I was full of important suggestions for Hardy. It didn't cross my mind that if Hardy wanted me he would have found me direct, through Chambrun who knew where I was.

It didn't cross my mind until five minutes later when I walked into Saville's suite with Sally and saw that Hardy wasn't there.

"I'm sorry, Mark," Sally said quietly. "I had to get you up here."

Saville faced me, looking pale and tense. As the door closed I was aware that the muscular George Brimsek was standing behind me. Paul Drott, the vice-president, was standing over by the windows, looking down at the East River lights. It was now dark outside.

Sally walked over to the center table and got herself a cigarette. Saville held his lighter for her.

"Thanks, Sally," he said, his voice low and unsteady.

"Call me Mata Hari," she said, and turned away from him. "You've managed to make me hate myself, Bob."

"I'm sorry," he said. He turned to me. "I'm sorry, too, that I got you here under false pretenses, Haskell."

"No harm done," I said, trying to sound like the leading

man in a soap opera. "I'll just take off."

"Not so fast, buster," Brimsek said. He was leaning casually against the door. He pasted on his white smile. "The so-called Mafia is now running the show."

Richter's nickname for them suddenly didn't sound so funny.

"Sally called up from downstairs to say that Karl Richter had been filling you full of it," Saville said. He was really trying the line of apologetic charm. Brimsek's muscular bulk against the door rather negated it. I like to be free to accept or reject apologies. "We're in a very tight spot, Haskell. We can't allow you and your friend Chambrun to get your hotel off the hook by throwing mud at us."

"I wasn't aware—"

"Hotels don't thrive on the news that guests are murdered and stuffed into closets and that attempts are made to throw other guests out of windows," Saville said. "But if you can dump it all in our laps nobody will remember where it happened—just that it was us. There's too much at stake to let you play games with us."

"So I go out the window?" I asked, returning to my jaunty soap-opera role.

"Don't be absurd," Saville said. "We are going to convince

you, once and for all, of the truth."

"Under the circumstances I might be easily convinced," I said.

The doorbell rang. Brimsek moved away and unlocked the door. Karl Richter stood outside looking pink and well scrubbed. The steamroom and shower had done wonders for him.

"Ah, the delight of being wanted!" he said, sauntering into the room. Brimsek closed the door and its lock snapped shut. Richter smiled at me. "Have you now also become a story expert, Haskell?"

It happened so fast I had no time to make even a joking answer. Brimsek swung Richter around and hit him flush on the mouth with a pile-driving right. Blood spurted like juice out of a grapefruit. Richter landed on a small straight-backed chair that crumpled under him like matchwood. He sat on the floor, his eyes blurred, fumbling at his shattered mouth.

"You jerk," Brimsek said, massaging his right fist gently. He had forgotten to take off his smile. There was now something obscene about it.

"You can begin, Karl," Saville said, "by telling Haskell the truth about Sheri."

Richter muttered something unintelligible. Brimsek reached

down, caught him by the coat lapels, and dragged him up onto his knees. Then he hit him again, flush on the bleeding mouth. Richter screamed.

I moved in. "All right, tough guy," I said. "That's enough."

I didn't get as far as Brimsek. Saville moved deftly. My right arm was suddenly bent behind me in an agonizing twist lock. "You are here just to listen, Haskell," Saville said. "Go on, Karl. Tell him about Sheri."

Both murderous hatred and fear were reflected in Richter's pale eyes.

"One more, Karl, just for openers?" Brimsek asked, reaching for him.

"No!" Richter's voice was thick.

"Then tell the man about Sheri," Brimsek said.

Richter moved his bloody mouth. "Sheri is Saville's sister," Richter said. "The only way he can keep her out of trouble—"

"And out of the newspapers," Brimsek interpolated.

"—is to keep her under his thumb every minute." Richter touched his mouth. "What I told you is a rumor I've never bothered to correct—up to now."

Brimsek yanked him up to his feet again.

"No!" I heard Sally say.

"Now about a conspiracy to

pin a murder on Norman," Brimsek said. He hit Richter again, a vicious uppercut that seemed to come almost from the floor. Richter literally went up and through the air and fell in a heap against the wall.

"You'll kill him, George!" Sally said.

"Too good for him," Brimsek said. He started across the room toward Richter.

The doorbell rang.

"Ignore it," Brimsek said.

He reached Richter, dragged him up to his feet, began to cross-slap him—back of his hand to one side of the face, front of his hand to the other—whack, whack, whack, whack.

The door opened. My heart did a great big thud against my ribs.

Jerry Dodd was the first one into the room, a passkey in his hand. Chambrun, Hardy, and Norman were behind him. Jerry got to Brimsek and managed to spin him around. Richter sank to the floor. Brimsek and Jerry faced each other, Jerry about half the muscleman's size. I can't tell you exactly what happened but suddenly Brimsek went through the air in a complete somersault and landed against the wall. Jerry stood over him.

"Don't move, big boy," Jerry said, "or I'll kick in your teeth."

Brimsek's smile was still there. "That was real good," he said. "How did you do it?"

"You, I suspect, are only a Brown Belt," Jerry said. "I'm a Black Belt. Take the lessons and you'll find out. Now what the hell's going on here?"

It poured out of me. Richter had given me a lead. There was a way to make the time schedule fit the killing of Frank Hansbury. I dished it out, chapter and verse.

"It's an interesting theory," Chambrun said. "I thought about it without Mr. Richter's assistance. But other facts—" He turned, and for the first time I noticed that Hardy had Norman's arm in a firm grip. "You see, Norman forgot to cancel his milk delivery."

"Milk delivery!" I figured the great man had lost his grip on things.

"The time Norman had to account for was between six and a little after eight last night," Chambrun said. "He said he went to his apartment for his mail and clean clothes. I thought I'd have Jerry check it out. Norman needed that alibi. Well, there were four bottles of milk outside Norman's door and four days' mail slipped under it. Norman certainly wasn't there last night."

I looked at Norman. He was

staring at the rug pattern.

"We brought Norman here to have him confront your sister, Mr. Saville," Chambrun said.

"My sister!" Saville said.

"I've always known Miss Southworth was your sister," Chambrun said. "We have our own way of discovering facts about our guests. The information is on your file card. What happened last night is something like this. When you all went down to dinner and left Hansbury here, he did try to reach Norman on the phone. He called his ex-wife because he knew Norman was headed there. But Norman hadn't arrived. He took a chance and called Norman's room. I've checked that out with the call slips at the switchboard.

"He found Norman still there, and asked him to come down the hall to this suite. Norman protested, but he came. Sheri was in her room and couldn't hear. Hansbury and Norman got into an argument. Hansbury wanted Norman to stay here till you came back. Norman was to tell you he wouldn't write another word and was withdrawing his material—the original idea of *The Masked Crusader*. Norman refused. Hansbury was his agent, so Hansbury should handle it. Besides, he was already late for

a date with Mrs. Hansbury."

Chambrun turned to Norman. He was almost gentle. "Then what happened, Norman?"

"He—he laughed at me," Norman said. "He said he'd been with Gillian a couple of nights ago. He said she wouldn't be eager for me to get there—not after the master had been with her. I—I hit him. Without thinking I clipped him on the back of the neck. He fell down on the floor. He was dead—just like that!"

"No plan, no murderous intent. It just happened," Chambrun said. "Then Norman panicked. He could have called Jerry, told his story, and at the worst got off with a manslaughter charge. But he panicked. He has a quick mind, Norman. He knew if Hansbury were found here, all the others were alibied. They were in the Grill Room. The trail might quickly lead to him. If he could get the body out of here—somewhere else—

"Then he remembered Saville's wheel chair and his makeup equipment—the wig, glasses. He found them in the next room. He decked Hansbury out in the disguise and wheeled him out into the hall. I think he probably meant to dump Hansbury in the linen room or in a cleaning closet. Right, Norman?"

Norman nodded. "But that damned woman was out there—Mrs. Kniffin—drooling at what she thought was Saville. So I had no choice. I unlocked my door and wheeled Frank in there. Then I had my bright idea." His laugh was mirthless. "If they found Frank there it could be made to look as if somebody was trying to frame me. So I put him in the closet. I brought the chair and the make-up stuff back here. Then I hightailed it for Gillian's and stayed there.

"This morning I hunted up Mark with my story about needing a place to work. I didn't want to be the one who found Frank's body. So I asked for things to be brought from my room, including my slippers. I knew that whoever went looking for the slippers in the closet would find Frank's body."

"Hold everything," I said. "Maybe all this happened. But you're not going to say that Norman tried to throw himself out my window? Who was the man in the stocking mask?"

Chambrun's smile was wry. "*The Masked Crusader*," he said. "I suggested it once, not believing it. There was no one. A product of Norman's fiction writer's mind. Norman set the stage—overturned the furniture, opened the window. He cracked

himself in the mouth. He clawed his own chest. Hardy's man has just taken some stuff from under Norman's fingernails to the lab. The result will almost certainly show bits of Norman's skin."

"I did it," Norman said. "I—I wanted to make absolutely sure you were convinced there was someone else."

"When the stage was set Norman took the telephone off the hook and yelled for help," Chambrun said. He turned to Saville. "We came here in the hope that your sister just might have seen Norman coming in or going out or returning. It isn't too important, but Hardy likes to have his cases nice and tidy."

"If you could leave her out of it—" Saville said huskily.

"What about this mess?" Jerry asked, nodding toward the battered Richter. "Assault with something damn near like a deadly weapon."

Brimsek was on his feet. "Ask him," he said, always smiling. "Ask him if he'd like to bring charges. When I get through telling what I know about him in open court—"

"Forget it," Richter said in a voice that sounded as though it came from the bottom of a well.

Norman turned to me. "Would you try to explain to Gillian, Mark? I know she loved

Frank. I didn't mean to kill him. But I couldn't bear it when he made those cheap cracks about her."

"I'll explain to her, Norman."

Saville moved forward. "Before you take Geller away, Lieutenant, could we talk to him a few minutes about his

property—*The Masked Crusader*? I think we'll still want to use it."

Hardy looked at him, his eyes puzzled. "Don't you ever think about anything else, Saville?"

Saville's dark eyebrows rose. "Why should I, Lieutenant? It's my business."



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